

14

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

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SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS
NEVER DONE!

VISIT...

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THE RYUO'S WORK  IS
NEVER DONE!



"AND,
ONE MORE
THING---"

"... TO OFFICIALLY
TELL HIM THAT
GINKO PROMOTED
TO 4-DAN."

"SOMETHING
EXTREMELY
IMPORTANT
FOR THE
BOTH OF US"

"WE'VE COME
TO MASTER
KIYOTAKI'S
PLACE ..."



"THE DAY FOLLOWING
THE THIRD CROWN TITLE
MATCH. AI AND I STAY
BEHIND IN ISHIKAWA
PREFECTURE TO EXPLORE
KANAZAWA CITY FOR A
WHOLE DAY."

"FORGET
ABOUT
SHOGI! I'M
RENTING
YOU FOR
THE WHOLE
DAY,
MASTER!"



MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU

Ryuo. First trip to Tokyo was for the Elementary Meijin Finals and broadcast on TV. Flaunted a picture of himself in front of Shibuya's Hachiko dog statue only for Ginko to rip it to shreds.

Ginko Sora

Yaichi's older sister apprentice and the first female to enter the professional Shogi leagues. Following in her younger brother apprentice's footsteps, she achieved her dream of seeing Hachiko the next year and took a picture to mark the occasion. Has done so every trip to Tokyo ever since.



AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice. She visits the Hatomori Shrine without fail before every match in Tokyo like she did with Grade Schooler Practice Group and prays for victory atop Fujizuka.



AI YASHAJIN

Yaichi's second apprentice. Walked along Ginkgo Avenue while visiting her parent's alma mater in Tokyo. Bought an Akamon yunomi teacup as a souvenir.



MACHI KUGUI

Yamashiro Ouka title holder and Shogi journalist. Kyoto native, she refers to trips to Tokyo as traveling *down*. However, Tokyo-style sushi is a personal favorite.



KEIKA KIYOTAKI

Daughter of Yaichi's Master. First came to Tokyo with her friends on a trip after high school graduation. The *onigiri* rice balls on sale at convenience stores not being seasoned with seaweed was quite a shock.



RINA SHAKANDO

Women's Legend. Came to Tokyo X-years ago in order to become a Shogi apprentice. Captivated by the *Takenoko-zoku* dancers who filled the streets of Harajuku at the time, she used her Shogi winnings to open her own apparel shop in the same area.



THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 14

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Shirabii

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Review Session

PROLOGUE AI HINATSURU

“Your early game skill is truly on the rise. Any particular reason, I wonder?”

This is the second time I’ve done a practice session with the two people smiling at me through the screen.

When I got the invitation at first, I thought it was a joke or a fake email But I knew it was real as soon as we played a match.

Even so, doing a review session on an app like this and seeing their faces makes me so nervous that talking is really hard

“Last time you abandoned the early game completely and that was that. But this time, you stayed neck and neck all the way to mid game. Have you started using software for research, by chance? He-he Elementary students grow up so fast! I can see why Yaichi treasures you the way he does.”

But he took total control in the mid game.

That’s the difference in our abilities.

He used a few sequences I’d never seen before. Since I fell into every one of his traps, the board turned into something completely different from what I had in mind

“Yes, your formations fell apart trying to stretch too far. That’s why the match was decided before we got to your favorite part, the late game. You need to have a better sense of formation judgment before those software sequences are useful. This is just a guess on my part, but that Master of yours has forbidden you to practice using software, has he not?”

“.....!”

All I can do is bite my lip. How could he tell?

“He-he. Disobeying your Master’s orders Naughty naughty.”

Even through the screen, I can tell he's giggling.

"I'm not saying that Yaichi is being mean to you. In fact, he's being protective. You'd better be on your guard Once you set foot in the Women's Legend League, borrowed knowledge isn't going to work on anyone. That includes Tamayo here, yes?"

This man can tell how nervous I am just by looking.

The Women's Legend League, which is right around the corner, decides who is going to win the opportunity to challenge Women's Legend Rina Shakando for the title.

The number of players is set at nine. It's very competitive, with the bottom four being replaced each year. There was a time when people called it the Women's A Division. Being in it was proof that you were among the best of the best.

No one there is weaker than me. Everyone is ranked higher. And the more I look at their match records, the more hopeless I feel But I have to win!

I have to keep the promise that Master and I made with my parents——.

"Being matched against higher ranking players, what paradise."

..... Huh?

Playing against stronger people is paradise? What's that supposed to mean?

"It's only natural to lose against stronger opponents. There's no pressure, so it's easy to go all out and thus play up to your potential."

I can relate. That's what it's always like for me.

"On the other hand, when everyone around you thinks it's only natural for *you* to win See? That's why so many professionals and Women's League players lose their luster right after playing so well as amateurs. I speak from experience, having succumbed to that pressure in my own debut match."

He tells me about the hell that's waiting for the players who get strong.

...About the world that I, an amateur until very recently, couldn't imagine.

"I still get reminded of it, even after reaching A and challenging for titles myself. That includes being ridiculed, I might add. Those voices only get louder with every victory."

He always smiles, but this is the first time I've seen his face cloud up. I gulp as the horrible scars hidden beneath his handsome white features appear right before my eyes.

That look tells me everything I need to know about scars that won't heal even after more than 20 years.

"After all, I am the professional who lost to a ————— in his debut."

PROLOGUE AI YASHAJIN

It's my first time back at the Kanto Shogi Association building in Sendagaya in a while, but this strange air has completely taken over.

"..... Does she really get to keep them? The Board of Directors They're tyrants"

"That's not what They said at today's press conference"

The murmurs are passing through every corner of the building. I glance coldly at a few of the Women's players chatting away in the corner of the arena.

Today I'm taking part in the final stage of the Women's Throne League. It's for the title that Ginko Sora vacated along with Queen after promoting into the professional leagues.

With the invincible Snow White out of the way, everyone had fire in their eyes at first. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity had arrived.

However, this stir in the air is coming from something else.

"..... Worry about that after you've won, why don't you?"

I practically spit under my breath as I sit down in the lower seat and wait for my opponent.

Except the upper seat is still empty at 10 o'clock. Just as alarm was starting to spread to the staff she finally walks in.

Since the rules clearly state that a tardy player will be penalized by losing three times the amount they were late in waiting time, she barely has any left at all.

I do my best to ignore the fact that I have an overwhelming advantage before the first move is even played, clear my mind and greet her.

“Let’s have a good match.”

She doesn’t answer. Not that I care one way or the other.

After all, my opponent today is known for bizarre behavior.

Word is that her bizarre antics have died down recently But now that I’m here in Kanto, I can tell that isn’t the case.

It isn’t that she’s becoming normal.

She’s become so bizarre that it’s easy to forget what’s normal. That’s what they meant.

Jagged stripes through the pupils of jittery eyes. An upper body that continuously sways to and fro with a dancer’s ferocity. Amateurish manners, like using only her pointer finger to slide pieces around the board none of which is appropriate for a title holder.

A feeling closer to pity than anger wells up within me as I quip, “Sad that this is what happened to a woman who once played versus matches against my Master.”

Her swaying comes to a sudden stop, her eyes focusing on one spot for the first time. I can see my face reflected in those giant eyeballs.

“You you’re Yaichi’s...?”

“Yes. His apprentice. For now.”

Yes, for now. I’m just simply his apprentice right now. However, I have no intention of letting it end there. I’m letting another woman rent him for the time being, but he will be mine in the end. Just like the Women’s Throne Title.

Then, now that my opponent knows I’m Yaichi’s apprentice——.

“..... Ahaaa.”

Uttering that strange sound, she suddenly lunges forward! On the board, of course.

I never once considered this timing for an attack, so I was shocked. It's completely unprepared.

Not me. *She wasn't ready.*

"Your King You're going to fight with it still at 7 Two?"

The enemy King is just sitting there, one move away from completing a Mino Castle formation.

I couldn't help but point that out and ask, "Are you mocking me?"

That position is even worse than the King having not moved at all.

It's a bad formation. A terrible formation. Call it what you like, but this *is not Shogi*.

"As you wish I'll crush you."

I thought it was some kind of invitation, so I'll just trample through any and all of the traps she puts in my way!

The match ends in the blink of an eye.

Not to mention that she had almost zero waiting time to begin with, so her moves were extremely inefficient. Her King is cornered before the lunch break.

"Seven, eight, niiiiiiiiiii—..." The match recorder drags that number out abnormally long. My opponent isn't even reaching for the board. She has no moves to make.

"U-Um Please make a m——."

"Time is up, yes? I win."

My opponent, vanquished due to a rule violation, doesn't put her hand on the piece stand or bow her head She just keeps tapping her King with her finger over and over again.

The same way that a kid would poke at a dead bug on the ground out of boredom.

Just what is this attitude?

Is she upset that she lost to someone younger than herself? Well, not that I really care.

“Your King was too wide open. Yet your offensive push was unorganized at best. It would be better to decide if you’re going for a rapid attack strategy or trying to draw out the match beforehand, otherwise your formations won’t hold up in the mid game.”

The response to my assessment was short.

Her face splits open at her mouth, seemingly going all the way back to her ears, as she makes one simple sound.

“Ahaaa.”

That’s it for this review session.

I stand up and leave the room with my opponent still tapping her King. While I want to get back to Kobe as quickly as possible, there’s still something I have to do here in Tokyo.

Someone I want to see in an agamic sense.

RECORD 1

空
銀
子

GINKO
SORA

BIRTHDAY

September 9th.

The day when a press conference for the final day of the 3-*dan* division would normally be held in Tokyo's Shogi Association building but is taking place at the Meiji Kinenkan Banquet Hall instead.

And it's all for a single newly promoted 4-*dan*.

"The Shogi Association Chairman, Seiichi Tsukimitsu, is currently attending the Second Crown Title Match taking place in Kobe, and thus is absent. Women's League Chairman Rina Shakando will be presiding in his place," the elderly master of ceremonies vigorously explains to the small army of reporters who have flooded the main hall. "Also, Sora 4-*dan*'s Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, had a prior arrangement in Osaka and is not in attendance."

"Her Master isn't here?!"

"This is the official announcement for the first female professional Shogi player, ever!! Today will go down in history!!"

"What could possibly be more important than his own apprentice's promotion announcement?!"

The crowd erupts in anger and surprise, but the master of ceremonies gives a calm answer.

"Overseeing an event for elementary school students."

That must've been the last answer they were expecting, because the hall went silent. Bewilderment, most likely.

I think they were hoping to get a picture of Master and I shedding tears of joy in each other's arms.

But Master doesn't like this kind of event in the first place. And—.

“..... He was against me even joining the Sub League because he thought I was too physically weak to do it.”

That’s why I avoided him during the final month of the 3-*dan* division and he also avoided me. We’d start arguing if we saw each other

I’m sure he doesn’t know how to feel even now that I’m a professional, so he found an excuse to avoid coming here today.

“But I don’t miss him. It’s easier this way,” I whisper to myself in a small room separated from the main hall as my heart pounds with pre-match anticipation.

Reason being, I’m not here to celebrate or to bask in the moment.

I’m here to declare war on every single professional player in the Shogi world.

“Ah, I still haven’t introduced myself. I am Mine, an employee at the Shogi Association and your master of ceremonies for today,” the elderly man casually announces before continuing. “Without any further ado——. It gives me great pleasure to introduce the first female professional Shogi player, Ginko Sora 4-*dan*!”

I walk into the main hall.

The staff told me that there were just as many reporters here as the day that the Meijin took all seven professional titles for himself.

That all of Japan is celebrating me like they did for him.

Except, back then I know there were people who weren’t wishing him well at all.

“Thank you for coming today.”

I put as much force behind my voice as I can to keep it steady. If I didn’t, I’m sure my legs would be shaking, too.

“..... Several days have passed since my promotion became official, but I don’t feel like I have entered the professional ranks just yet. However——.”

Countless cameras rise and wait for Naniwa’s Snow White to smile or shed a tear.

“Today is my 16th birthday. I’m genuinely surprised by how happy I feel about it.”

The reporters look up at me in confusion.

Mr. Mine, on the other hand, seems to understand what I meant.

“Birthdays were scary during my time in the 3-*dan* division because of the age limit. Every time that September 9th drew closer I felt as though my window of opportunity was closing with each passing day.”

Talent is everything in the Shogi world.

“That was especially true once I began junior high school I felt that I was getting weaker with every year.”

And age is talent.

The shadow I’m chasing became a professional in junior high school.

That shadow kept drifting further and further away And I was always anxious.

“Luck is what allowed me to promote out of the 3-*dan* division after only one season. While I’m happy and relieved I cannot wait to test my skills on the professional stage.”

On that day the Meijin claimed all the titles.

It’s said that a certain professional spat out these words while the rest of society was singing his praises.

“Today is humiliating for every single Shogi player.”

Those people are going to be my opponents from now on. No professional

..... except for one was hoping that I would get promoted. If I don't get any results, I'm sure I'll get chided with words like:

"3-dan division was so weak that a girl made it through."

—People like Mr. Kagamizu, Mr. Karako Friends and fellow players made me strong, but I took Shogi, their very lives, away from them.

I didn't become a junior high school professional. The shadow is still far, far away.

Then there is the first elementary school professional, Sota Kunugi.

I never lost to him in the Sub League, not once.

—I *am* strong! I became one of them One of the Shogi Martians I'd only been able to look up at until now!

There's no need for smiles or tears at this press conference.

Crying right after getting promoted does nothing for me. After all, who would be intimidated by a player who was satisfied by just being there?

So I won't cry. Absolutely not.

"Becoming a professional Shogi player has been my dream since I was a child. Although that dream tormented me during my years in the Sub League It has finally come true. Therefore, my time chasing a dream has ended. It's time for me to set my sights on something more——."

I make my declaration.

"Claiming a professional title. And I absolutely will."

The crowd stirs as cameras flash from every direction. Most of the media people in the hall are men, and nearly all of them seem to doubt me Or, perhaps, they find my claim amusing.

—I said it There's no going back now

Every professional will now take it on themselves to put the cheeky little girl

in her place.

My taking a title would be humiliating for every man who has made it into the professional leagues.

“Thank you, Sora 4-*dan*.”

I bow and take a seat as the voice filling the hall starts to waiver.

“That was such a courageous and touching speech, I Pardon me I-I”

The reporters don’t seem to understand why the master of ceremonies is wiping tears away with a handkerchief.

Mr. Mine was once a Sub League member.

Unfortunately, he was forced out by the age limit.

After he started working at the association, having to watch Sub League members being forced to leave year after year became so painful that he considered quitting many times.

The reason why he stayed all the way until he reached retirement age this year was because he wanted to be here to see me become a professional... though he didn’t say so until halfway through the 3-*dan* division season.

Seeing Mr. Mine tear up is making my eyes water. If we were alone right now, I’m sure we’d be bawling.

But I absolutely won’t cry today. I refuse to.

“..... Beg your pardon. Next, I would like to invite Chairman Shakando of the Women’s League to say a few words.”

“Though rude, I will be keeping my seat. My legs lack the strength, you see”

Shakando-*sensei* politely refuses the invitation to the podium.

“First off, I have administrative news to convey.”

She delivers the important announcement as if making small talk with crowd.

“The Board of Directors convened yesterday and came to the decision that Women’s title holders shall retain their titles in the event of professional promotion.”

“HUUUH?!”

“I thought they had to automatically forfeit them?!”

“Wh-What title am I supposed to use for my article now?”

It’s understandable that a big change overnight like this would come as a shock. And the board was obviously playing a waiting game. Women’s League players must be fuming right now. But I’m perfectly calm.

—I better pay them back for all their help.

Simply participating in the title matches won’t be enough anymore. I’m sure they’ll want me to appear in commercials for their sponsors and go to events as well. That’ll cost both time and energy. Graduating from high school might not be possible.

“In other words, Sora 4-*dan* will continue appearing in Queen and Women’s Throne title matches until they are claimed from her by another player. Moving on—.”

Shakando-*sensei* looks over at me.

“I understand it’s inappropriate, now that you are a professional But I will be taking the liberty to refer to you as Ginko moving forward.”

That’s what she has always called me.

She had been told to refer to me as the first female 4-*dan* in history to hammer that point home, but Sensei casually ignores that guideline.

“The first time I had the honor of playing against Ginko, she was an elementary school fifth grader right after her 11th birthday.”

I remember that day clearly.

I had hit a wall in the Sub League and went against Master's wishes to take part in the Mynavi Women's Open. Winning it gave me the right to challenge this prolific Women's League player for the Queen title.

And, what she said to me during the review session changed my life.

"Finally, I found the one who can make my dream a reality."

—That was the first time. She was the first person to believe that I, a girl, could become a professional

Without those words and her assistance setting up practice sessions with professionals for me whenever I came to Tokyo, I would still be toiling in the Sub League and living in fear of September 9th.

"Playing against Ginko, it was her strength that surprised me."

With an opening like that, I was sure that Shakando-sensei was going to compliment me on my talent.

But—.

"Reason being that all I had heard from Kiyotaki 9-dan about his live-in apprentice was that she was a talentless, run-of-the-mill little girl."

"Huh?"

I couldn't stop that sound from escaping. But there's a kindness in her eyes that I've never seen before as she elaborates.

Reveals a truth that I had never known.

"A sickly child, she often ran fevers and was quick to cry. Yet, she was also selfish and a sore loser, to the point that in her Master's own words, she forced herself into his home in order to extract revenge for losing the match. Quite the troublesome little one to be sure."

Master saw me like that?

“However, whenever something befell that little apprentice, Kiyotaki 9-*dan* would always contact me. There was desperation in his voice, almost like Yes, he had been blessed with a second daughter despite his advancing age.”

“.....!”

Suddenly, I could hear Master’s voice in the back of my mind.

“Rina, Ginko’s burnin’ up! Whadda I do?!”

“Ginko’s insistin’ on joinin’ the Sub League Whaddya think I should do?”

I can just see him fretting in a hushed voice, the phone clenched in his hand. Not that I ever saw it with my own eyes.

Haaaa I can't

“Whenever I spoke with Kiyotaki 9-*dan* With Kousuke, I felt more and more like I had gained a daughter as well. He-he You are free to chuckle at this spinster’s claim, as I have never been married let alone birthed a child of my own

Not a single person laughed.

Actually, there are over 100 reporters in here and their eyes are all turning red as they hang on to every word she says.

“The girl sitting beside me now is not the ever-talented, ever-beautiful Naniwa’s Snow White.”

I grit my teeth and listen.

“She is the frailest, yet hardest working run-of-the-mill 16-year-old girl you will ever see.”

I can’t. I can’t cry now.

I made up my mind I absolutely will not

“Which is why I’m so proud. Which is why I am so overjoyed. Her accomplishment is not due to some divine gift of talent—but a dream that has come into fruition under her own power.”

A single tear rolls down Shakando-*sensei*’s cheek.

“A dream that women can join the professional ranks A dream that all girls who play Shogi share.”

I’ve never seen Sensei cry before

Then she says this in place of my shy, whiny excuse for a Master.

“Thank you, Ginko. You’ve worked so very hard



“.....!! Sen sei”

I made the decision that I absolutely would not cry, but the dam breaks just like that.

My 16th birthday: one that started with all smiles.

Turns out it's the day I cried the hardest in my life.

My tears didn't even have time to dry before my jam-packed schedule after the press conference begins ticking by like the final seconds of waiting time.

Mainly, going to greet all the different sponsors.

“I can't turn down a request from *the* Naniwa's Snow White, now can I? Here, happy birthday!”

I made simple requests to support the financially struggling Shogi Association, and they all opened their checkbooks to write down unbelievable numbers. A few hundred millions of yen even

Using the excuse that I am still in training to avoid meeting influential people won't work now that I'm a professional, no matter how long I've been working with these people.

I nearly received the Citizens Award while visiting the Prime Minister's residence.

“I can't accept this. Unlike the Meijin, I haven't accomplished anything”

“In that case, you'll accept it once you have a title, yes?”

And make it quick, please? While I'm still in office I couldn't tell if the most powerful person in this country was joking or not, so an awkward smile was the best I could do.

By the time every box on the schedule was checked off and I got back to the hospital, it was already late at night.

I'm exhausted But, I'm not done yet.

"..... Can't sleep, not yet
Not until I answer my emails"

Without the energy to flip on the lights, I listlessly collapse into the bed. Only my fingertips move as I open my smartphone and set to work. There are thousands of emails waiting for me, from people I've met during my 14 years of playing Shogi, all unopened.

But I was only happy to respond to them for about the first 10 or so

After that, well I don't mean to be rude to them, but I'd rather be using this time and energy for Shogi research.

"..... I go out there and say I'm going to take a title when really I haven't even gotten past the starting line Actually, I wonder how much weaker my Shogi has gotten after today"

I lost my last shred of motivation to keep going after replying to the hundredth email. Just then.

Ding! A video pops up on my



phone.

“From Keika? What could it be?”

It almost feels like she calculated the very moment my heart would give out. I open it and press play——.

“We all made a cake to celebrate your birthday and your promotion, Ginko!”

A slightly misshapen cake appears on screen.

Like something a kid would make is what crosses my mind when...

“Sora-sensei! Happy birthday!!” yells a girl wearing an apron with whipped cream on her cheek. Yaichi’s first apprentice.

That little blonde French girl who Yaichi apparently promised to make his bride and that plain girl in glasses are there, too.

“Hwappy birwthday!”

“Happy birthday.”

They echo.

Then Keika starts leading them in singing happy birthday to me.

That girl who always wore a red jacket and that second apprentice of Yaichi’s aren’t around, but Keika and Master being there makes it a strange group of five. In any case, they finished singing and put 16 candles on the cake.

“Allow me to do the honors for ya, Ginko. *Augh—hemmm!*”

Master half-coughs as he clears his throat and leans down toward the candles.

“Dad, make sure your beard doesn’t get too close to the flames, okay?”

“Yah, I’m bein’ careful. Jus’ make sure ya get a good angle on the candles goin’ o-gaahhh, ‘at’s hoooot! DAAHHHHH——HHHHH!!”

“G-Grandpa-sensei!!”

“What did I just tell you, you bearded fossil?! I’ll go get water from the kitchen, but don’t you dare let any sparks fall onto the *tatami* mats!!”

“Gwampa! Bweard all spawkly! Pretty☆”

“Charlette! Don’t touch it!! His beard is on fire!!”

“H-Hello, fire department?! It’s an emergency! Send a truck over at once, please!!”

“Ayano! Call 911 for this and I’ll never be able to show my face outside again!!” Keika screams somewhere off screen.

The next thing I see is Master writhing around on the *tatami* with smoke coming out of his beard.

Just what am I watching in the middle of the night on my own birthday?

Master gets splashed in the face with a bucket full of water and a loud hiss comes from his beard. That’s where the video ends.

“Ha-ha-ha Why is my Master burning on my birthday, huh?”

I’m so drained that all I can do is just laugh.

Here I am, in the middle of the dark hospital room all by myself. I’m laughing so hard that tears are pouring out of my eyes before I know it.

“HA-HA-HA!! Aha-ha-ha-ha Haaaaaaa”

And, fall asleep with my smartphone still clenched in my hand.

Perhaps they had mercy on me?

The Shogi gods are usually so unforgiving, but they gave me a birthday present.

A dream where I get to see the person I wanted to spend today with, who I

wanted to congratulate me more than anyone.

“Happy birthday, Big S- Ginko,” he says, still not used to calling me by my name As much as I hate to admit it, he looked really cool saying it. Strong, too.

“About time, stupid Yaichi,” I say teasingly and jump into his open arms.

After that, we——play Shogi.

Dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, in a big *tatami* room at an upscale inn somewhere we play, and play, and play a neverending series of Shogi matches.

It was in that dream that I realized something.

I never mentioned my actual goal today.

MASTER AND APPRENTICE CROSSING

“Oh?”

Coming through the bullet train turnstiles at Shin-Osaka Station, I get a glimpse of the girl out of the corner of my eye.

Long black hair like a wing.

She’s dressed in all black like a Gothic doll, but with an impish beauty about her. And, keeping with her personal theme, she has a black tablet clutched in one little hand as she works on it with the other.

This grade schooler standing out from the throngs of people is——.

“Hello there, Ai! What a coincidence!”

Ai Yashajin.

The youngest girl ever to reach 2-*dan* in the Women’s League at only 10 years old, and also *my* apprentice.

“On your way home from Tokyo? That’s where the Women’s Throne League is being held, right?”

I walk over and start talking without thinking much of it, but the living doll dressed in black isn’t happy to see me Actually, she shoots me a suspicious glare and says, “..... Are you stalking me?”

“S-S-S-Stalking you?! No, no! I just said it’s a coincidence, didn’t I?!”

“But You knew I had a match in Tokyo and the reason why. It sounds like you’re tracking my movements”

“I’m busy, but not so busy that I don’t check to see what league matches my apprentice is in! That’s how Masters show their love, right?!”

“Would you not press your perverse version of love onto me?”

People passing by must've heard our conversation.

"Wait, what was that?"

"He said showing love, right?"

"A lover's quarrel, maybe?"

"But that girl's gotta be in grade school"

Crap, crap! Station security is gonna show up any minute!

I pull Ai around the corner and ask her in a very quiet voice.

"..... Where's Akira?"

"Buying meat buns from 551."

Those things are famous in Osaka.

Though I'm sure she could find them just fine in Kobe Then again, they've got chilled packs on sale inside the Shin-Osaka bullet train concourse. There's never a line, so it's like having your own secret shop. So that's why she stopped by here instead of riding the train straight back to Kobe

"I didn't know you liked those."

"How should I know? I've never had one."

"Say what? Then why did you bother getting off the bullet train to buy some——?"

Wait, now I remember.

Mio Mizukoshi, who moved away after her father was transferred overseas just recently, loved 551 meat buns.

"..... Ah, I see. You miss your best friend, so you want to try one of her favorite foods."

"Wh-What are you talking about?! Why would I care what that chatterbox liked to eat?! Akira wanted some, so we stopped here. Don't get the wrong

idea, trash!!”

“Huuuh? That’s weird. I never mentioned Mio’s name, did I?”

“..... Die, will you!”

Our first squabble in a long time, and we’re tied one to one.

It’s a big relief talking to her like normal.

The last time we talked, um She said something I never saw coming

“I love you, Yaichi.”

It happened right outside a wedding chapel in Kobe And then she kissed me.

The thing is, I still haven’t figured out if that was real or her idea of a prank. I’ve been focusing on my title matches recently to avoid thinking about it

“More importantly, tell me what was happening here.”

Almost like she hasn’t noticed the conflict playing out in my head, Ai takes over the conversation.

There’s a match record displayed on her tablet, one that looks familiar——.

“Hm? This this is the 2nd Crown Title Match. You were watching me play?”

“Not you, your Shogi.”

Then, Ai rephrases her own words.

“Your losing Shogi!”

“About that It’s clear just how much of an advantage he has when it comes to using software. Adapting that much in a week is really”

I got really good at analyzing pieces of software sequences and used the two-day format’s sealing move to figure out how it responds to offense and defense. The Shogi in the first match was comfortable all the way around.

But Okito-Crown found an even easier way to steal a victory star for me in the second match.

Seriously, it was like a magic trick.

“The defender *kept a steady 100 points behind during the early game as if calculating every single move*. Why would a Shogi player with a brain built like a cyborg intentionally avoid the best move every single time?”

“It’s true that Mr. Okito didn’t play the best moves on the board.”

I nod and continue.

“That strategy was so great *because it didn’t involve the best moves*.”

“..... So, I was right.”

I could hear the lightbulb coming on in her voice. Even if she went out of her way today just to hear me say that I don’t find it strange at all. Shogi players understand the value of a few words.

“By the way, are you on your way to Tokyo right now?”

“Yeah. For a placement match There’s no way I can do them in Osaka.”

Since I have the Shogi world’s strongest title, the Dragon King Ryuo, I sit in the upper seat for every league match other than when I challenge for another title. That means that my opponents have to come to Osaka.

But placement matches are all about fighting on equal ground, so I have to go to Tokyo despite my title.

Taking the first bullet train in the morning would get me there before the 10 o’clock starting time But spending the night is standard.

Add in the fact that I’ve got another match scheduled for two days after my title match, I don’t have time to take it slow.

“I stopped by my apartment a moment ago to change clothes, and it’s already this late. Ai Hinatsuru is probably still in class, right? It was strangely empty at

home Sure, it'd been a few days since I was there, but it didn't feel like home, you know?"

"Don't make it sound like you're a married couple living apart."

"You got that vibe, too? I was hoping to come home to my cute apprentice greeting me at the door, saying Master? Do you want dinner first? Or a bath? Or maybe Sh – o – gi? That's what a pro's apartment is supposed to be like, right?!"

"Gross."

That one word slices through me like a sword. Ouch Yeah, I know

"She is staying at Grand Master's house, yes?"

"Yeah. Most of her stuff is over there, so that's probably part of why it doesn't feel like it should at home, but"

"That explains all the annoying Come over and play, Ten-chan! messages she's been bombarding me with."

"Ahh It gets lonely sleeping in a bunk bed by yourself."

It's the same bed that Ginko and I used to share.

On the nights when she was staying at the hospital for one reason or another and I had it all to myself, I was all excited saying, "Yahooooooooooo! I'm freeeee!" But, strangely enough, I missed Ginko when she wasn't there.

"That chatterbox she went to school with is gone and her favorite Master is too busy. Spend some time with her already."

"I would if I could, trust me. It's just, the Ryuo Title Match starts right after the Crown Title Matches finish I'm going to be traveling all around the country like this for the rest of the year, probably."

"Yo Okito's your opponent for the Ryuo matches too, right? It's getting boring to watch, honestly. And disappointing."

“At least put sensei at the end of his name

Yo Okito-*Dual Title* is in the same generation of players as Mitsuru Oishi 9-*dan* and Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*. Just one generation behind the Meijin, Okito-*sensei* has been at the top of the Shogi world since before Ai was born.

She looks up at me with a cold gaze and says, “You’ve been spending a lot more time with Okito-*sensei* than with your own apprentices recently. Traveling around, staying at nice hotels, eating local dishes and sampling the desserts together.”

“It’s not like that

Since the matches use the two-day format, each one eats up four days of my schedule, if you include travel time. Since there’s a match every week, I’m spending a lot more time at work than I am at home.

Mix in my other matches, and I’m practically living out of my suitcase rather than taking the time to stop by the apartment.

On top of that, I have to turn in my phone during the matches so I can’t respond to emails or return phone calls for days on end

I used to see my live-in apprentice every single day, but it’s been almost a week since I heard from her

Now my walking right up to Ai Yashajin in the middle of a crowded train station doesn’t seem so strange, does it?

“I’ve got placement matches, yeah? Tournaments are starting, right? Don’t forget the King League is about to start, too. I don’t even have time to go home, let alone time to spend teaching Shogi sequences to you girls

I’m sorry about that, really.”

There’s no need to worry about Ginko anymore now that she turned pro, and Ai Hinatsuru has been staying at Master’s place. I haven’t been able to focus on Shogi this much in a very long time.

That’s the main reason I’ve been winning a lot recently, but the more I win,

the more matches I get scheduled for. It's a vicious cycle living in the Shogi world.

"The schedule is the most hectic when you hold two or three titles, but having all seven is much easier."

Words of wisdom from the Meijin, who currently still holds four titles.

That's deep and also scary at the same time.

"Being involved with two title matches at once makes it clear just how amazing the Meijin truly is He's had this kind of schedule for almost 30 years and also has a family. That's god-tier time management skills right there."

"In that case, hurry up and get the rest of the titles so you can teach us something useful."

"That's impossible, weren't you listening? Have you ever been told that you don't listen well to others at school, Lady Yashajin?"

"So what? You are the one who stole my first kiss."

"?! I-I didn't steal anything. Actually, you were the one who——."

Ah! Relax, relax.

Take a deep breath. Don't think back to that day. Don't fall for her taunts. Don't build up defenses

"Aren't you the one who refused to do big board analysis for her Master's title match in her own hometown?"

"What choice did I have? My own match took priority."

"Your match? You were supposed to do analysis during my second title match, and Ai Hinatsuru would be the third because its being held in Kanazawa. That's what we agreed upon when I became the challenger for the Crown Title, yes? It's your fault for not informing the scheduling department!"

"And, if I didn't?"

Now, it's so obvious

I went to Kobe thinking that Ai Yashajin would be there to do big board analysis for my match, so it was a real letdown when I didn't see her there. I won't say that's the reason I lost but ...

It's official. Saying she loved me was a prank. There's no doubt in my mind.

I mean, if she did have feelings for me, she would jump at every opportunity to spend time together, right?

"Besides, taking part in another person's title match doesn't suit me. Even if that other person happens to be my Master."

That, right there.

On the other hand, that is what made it clear to me that I had to take her as my apprentice, even if that meant stealing her away from someone else.

"Say, Yaichi."

Suddenly, my apprentice closes the gap between us.

Then, she grabs my necktie and——.



“What would you do if I told you I was waiting for you here the whole time?”

“.....!!”

My heart pounds like there’s no tomorrow. Blood rockets through my veins as my face burns up in an instant.

—Ai was waiting for me? Why?

No way Was she so concerned about me after losing the match that she stopped at Shin-Osaka Station and waited all this time to soothe my wounds?

In that moment, the pain of losing evaporates away. I can feel it leaving my heart.

Then comes the shame of knowing this fifth grader is toying with my emotions and the internal conflict of being okay with that starts making my head spin.

What saved me from falling into the pits of hell is—.

“My Lady! Meat buns have been purchased! Hm? Oh, Kuzuryu-*sensei*. Well, what a coincidence.”

The appearance of Akira Ikeda holding a big bag with 551 HORAI written on the side gives me the breather I so desperately needed in this long bout.

—Th-That’s right Coincidence. This is all just a coincidence

Shin-Osaka Station is huge, so why would she wait here without knowing for sure that I would pass by?

Ai Yashajin isn’t the type to do sappy stuff like that, at all.

COMING TO TOKYO

“Ahhh! There you are, Yaichi!”

Seeing a man dressed in a sharp suit and his hair slicked back walking this way with a friendly wave, it takes me a few seconds to figure out who it is.

“..... Bro?”

He’s changed so much, I can hardly believe it.

The last time I saw him would’ve been during last year’s Ryuo Title Match, the fourth to be exact. He was still a poor college student during the opening night party at the Hinatsuru Inn.

“I never thought I’d see my slob of a brother working as a hotel businessman. Between your club activities in the three part-time jobs you were juggling back then, you wouldn’t have had any time left over to study. I guess working really does change people”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Did a double take, didn’t you?”

The three Kuzuryu brothers are known for being slackers, but after he took a year off in the middle of college and still hadn’t found a job when he graduated in the winter of his fifth year, my big brother is in a league of his own.

Worse, he used my connections to get that job. More specifically, he managed to weasel his way into the good graces of Ai’s parents and is now making his way in the world. Talk about trash!

“Well, working directly under *her* would change anyone.”

“I have nothing but gratitude for Chairwoman Hinatsuru. Here, read her book and learn everything you can. Take her advice and all seven of those titles could be yours, not just the two.”

“Huh? Bro, do you always have that book with you?”

He hands me a book entitled *The Power of Women in Charge* (SB Creative) by Akina Hinatsuru with sticky notes of every color imaginable poking out of it. But the look in his eyes, that's not the brother I know. More like a zealot

Ai Hinatsuru's mother was in charge of an inn not too long ago. Now it sounds like she's got an entire company

"So! What do you think, Yaichi?! How does the new HinaTsuru grab you?!!"

The reason why my brother, who works for an inn on the north coast, is in Tokyo happens to be printed on a brochure in my hand.

The epitome of luxury has arrived in Tokyo.

Fancy white letters printed above the Tokyo nightscape aren't advertising the latest apartment complex. There's more.

The HinaTsuru, an inn synonymous with excellence on the north coast, has opened its doors in Tokyo. Treat yourself to the finest cuisine and traditional services without leaving the city An experience you will treasure forever, The HinaTsuru.

Basically, Ai's parents now own an inn in Tokyo as well.

While it's not open to the public yet, they're letting people with connections stay there already. So I took them up on the offer.

Just as all the fancy decorations start taking my breath away——.

"Kuzuryu-sensei. How nice it is to see you again!"

"Ah! I-I'm sorry it's been so long!!"

The owner has arrived. Just seeing her is enough to make me seriously consider kneeling. My brother, on the other hand, is already on his hands and knees paying reverence.

"It is an honor to host you on the day before your placement match. I hope we can continue this arrangement for the foreseeable future."

“Honestly, this is a huge help! Now that Gin- Sora 4-*dan* is a pro, my whole Shogi family will be traveling to Tokyo a lot more often.”

Job offers for all of us have skyrocketed thanks to the Ginko Bubble. Any of us showing up to an event draws in the media like magnets. Even Shumai-*sensei* has gotten called

Also, since nearly all Women’s League players are registered in Tokyo, the more matches that Ai Hinatsuru, Ai Yashajin and Keika win, the more they’re going to need to travel here. That’s especially true of my first apprentice, who is going to have to come here at least 11 times over the course of the Women’s Legend league matches.

“But why did you choose now of all times to open a branch in Tokyo? I’m sure the idea must’ve come up before now?”

“Yes, of course. Even my grandfather entertained the idea of a Tokyo branch and even an international location.”

“So, what’s changed?”

“..... It was about a year ago now, I believe, that I happened to become acquainted with a particularly good developer. As my daughter is set to marry, I allotted my extra time to putting this plan into action.”

“Oh, that makes sense No, wait just a minute. We’re not married, remember? She’s just my apprentice, remember?”

“Perhaps it is *you* who does not remember, Kuzuryu-*sensei*?”

She nearly cuts me off in a sharp voice.

“In the event that Ai does not claim a Women’s League title by the time she graduates from junior high school, she will retire from Shogi and begin training to take my place as the owner of the HinaTsuru.”

“And I marry into the Hinatsuru family to support her Correct?”

Of course, I remember that. I’ve never forgotten. Ever.

In order to take Ai as my apprentice even after she lost to Ginko Sora 2-*dan* during the last match of her Practice League entrance test, I got down on my hands and knees and begged Mrs. Hinatsuru not to take Ai back with her.

“Please, give me your daughter!!” Yeah.

Ai’s mother then repeats the conditions of the promise we made.

“You would be able to continue your Shogi career as well as assist at the inn if you were living in Tokyo, correct?”

“In that case, I think you might have jumped the gun a little bit on coming here. Ai will claim a title, I guarantee it.”

It’s only been a year and a half since we made that promise, and she’s already strong enough to compete with the top players in the Women’s League.

I wanted to take my time and train her little by little, but rather than slowing down, it feels like Ai grows more and more every single day. At this point, she’s the one giving me ideas on how to play rather than me teaching her what to do

“..... There is one more important piece to the equation.”

Never once breaking eye contact with me, the owner of the HinaTsuru brings up something even more surprising.

“Mr. Kuzuryu.”

“Me?”

“No. I’m referring to your brother.”

“Him?”

What can a guy who got hired half a year ago do to inspire that kind of confidence? He’s not just any new hire, either. He nearly failed out of college.

“M- Ma’aaaaam!”

My brother collapses to the floor, wailing, “I’ll follow you for the rest of my

life!!” while grinding his forehead into the floor at her feet. He is *that* useful?

Well, either way, this means I’ve got the perfect home away from home while working in Tokyo!

Their huge tatami rooms are perfect for Shogi practice sessions and overnight events. Not only will Ai be able to safely commute, she can travel around to different classrooms and play against all the players who live in the area.

—No matter what she says, I can tell that Mrs. Hinatsuru has the highest hopes for Ai.

The real reason she opened this Tokyo branch is simple.

She’ll never come out and say it, but I knew right from the start.

She loves her daughter so much that she’s willing to build an inn in Tokyo just for her.

NANIWA'S SNOW WHITE'S SOCIAL MEDIA DEBUT

“Limit press interaction?” echoes Sasari Oga Women’s 1-*dan* after laying out my grueling schedule, which seems to be built to defend against Bishop Exchange, as there isn’t a single opening anywhere.

Mr. Mine went back to Osaka right after serving as MC for the press conference, and the chairman, along with his secretary Ms. Oga, came up to my hospital room from Kobe to take his place. They are the ones in charge of my schedule, and it’s making me just as anxious as a rookie employee being put in charge of a vital project.

I made a simple request to keep the media at a distance, but Ms. Oga shoots it down under no uncertain terms.

“That would be impossible, Sora 4-*dan*.”

“Why? It’s not like I’m refusing to go to Shogi events or speak with our sponsors. A few less press conferences here and there shouldn’t be that big of a——.”

“We already are, Sora 4-*dan*. Ninety-nine out of every hundred requests from the press are being rejected at this time.”

“One-hundredth? All of that was just one-hundredth?!”

“Indeed. In one’s opinion, any further reduction would be asking for trouble.”

“You mean like paparazzi and stalkers?”

“That, and guesswork that leads to false reporting. For instance, should the press become aware that you have been residing in this hospital for an extended amount of time, what’s to stop them from assuming that you are dealing with a serious illness?”

“What a pain!”

My heart may have recovered, but it’s true that my body has been particularly frail since I was born. That kind of information reaching my opponents would put me at a disadvantage during my matches.

“Then there is the topic of your romantic life. Debate whether Naniwa’s Snow White is romantically involved with anyone or not is currently taking place among the masses.”

“How stupid Who I date has nothing to do with my Shogi.”

“The masses are not interested in your Shogi. It is the girl named Ginko Sora who has triggered the explosion in the popularity of Shogi, according to one’s analysis.”

“Seriously, what a pain! I can’t even date who I want.”

“What’s this? Do you have someone in mind as a romantic partner, Sora 4-*dan*?”

“No. How could anyone think so?”

“It’s quite possible. Should an article detailing your lovers getaway in the middle of the ever-sacred 3-*dan* division season see the light of day, that is.”

“.....”

I ran away from Osaka after I lost three straight matches in the 3-*dan* division. Yaichi came with me on that trip, but it was apparently Chairman Tsukimitsu who arranged for our hotel room.

Which means, the one who made the actual booking was

“There is an option.” Ms. Oga closes my pitch-black schedule and suggests, “Why not start your own social media account?”

“Social media? Are you telling me to put things about myself out there on the Internet?!”

“The masses have an easier time accepting firsthand information as the truth. What’s more, it removes the guesswork from the writing process for journalists. It is far easier to write articles with genuine quotes than with information purchased from the paparazzi.”

“So, I would be controlling the information about me? Interesting

Going on the offensive rather than defending.

That would make it easier to control the formations A fitting strategy for a Shogi player.

“Do you have experience with social media, Sora 4-*dan*?”

“None at all.”

“No second accounts under false names?”

“Second accounts? What are you talking about?”

“Then how do you explain thread titles like Lolicon Ryuo living with grade schooler should be arrested at once appearing on message boards and Shogi discussion sites?”

“..... No comment.”

What? All I did was spread the truth. It’s more dangerous for the kids if the perpetrator never gets left to their own devices, right?

“Then, allow me to explain in simple terms. Currently the most popular social media platform among young women by a wide margin is Instagram, on which they upload photos and videos of their own design. Therefore, one cannot recommend it because of the extra strain it would place upon you.”

“What you mean by that?”

“The online community is known for picking up on the slightest details, you see. It is possible to determine the exact address where a photograph was taken by analyzing the reflections in a person’s eyes, for example.”

“Y-You can do that?!”

“Because we are in the age of GPS’s that can also analyze the intricacies of Go and Shogi. For instance, if all the images containing Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* online were analyzed, it is possible to determine where he went and with whom. Should you wish, Sora 4-*dan*, you——.”

“No! I’m not a stalker!”

Nor am I that jealous pipsqueak. There’s no way I’m going to subject myself to something so dull as going through every picture of Yaichi online.

I prefer a faster, more direct approach. A few good punches will make him talk.

“But starting a social media account out of the blue is risky, isn’t it?”

“You may practice using one of the accounts under one’s management. Experience is the best teacher.”

“The association’s official account?”

“No. One’s account under an assumed name.”

Ms. Oga takes my phone, downloads the application, and logs into that account.

Hurrah! Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-dan Fan Club (Official)

The icon is a photo of the chairman smiling. Not only does it have information about all his matches, but a lot of extremely detailed side notes are on here as well. Also, there’s someone else in every single picture of the chairman Actually, now that I take a closer look, they were all taken by the same woman. Ms. Oga’s shadow or her reflection shows up in one way or another in each picture without fail

It’s like she’s digitally marking her territory by making her connection with the chairman as obvious as possible

“Do not post any tweets. Familiarize yourself with how to interact with others on the platform by following my example. Once you have done that, you can decide for yourself if you would like to create your own account.”

“..... Thanks.”

It takes me a little while to figure out what buttons do what, but I eventually find my way to other accounts belonging to members of the Shogi world.

Hmmm? She has one, too Ah! That sensei has a Twitter account as well. What a surprise

“And? What am I supposed to do?”

“How about entering your name into the keyword search to find tweets that pertain to you?”

Taking her suggestion, I type “Ginko S-” and Oh, wow.

“Huh?!! Why are there so many accounts using my name?!”

“This is a common occurrence for famous persons. Thus, many will create an account and leave it unused to prevent others from speaking in their name.”

“I can see why

Taking a deep breath, I finish typing my name into the bar when suddenly——.

“Ginko Sora, lover, Yaichi Kuzuryu”

Eeeep?! Wh-What what’s going on here?!

“Th-that’s not what I was typing!! It just popped up when I finished putting in my name——.”

“Completely understandable. That is the autofill feature. An algorithm predicts your search based on the first word in the search bar.”

Ms. Oga adjusts her glasses to hide a smile.

“It seems there are many rumors in circulation about the Ryuo and yourself, Sora 4-*dan*.”

“Huuuh? This has to be a joke Of all the stupid Arrrgh!”

Ignoring these rumors would do more harm than good, so I had better see what people are saying about us.

“How much does Ginko Sora 4-*dan* make? Does she have a boyfriend? What’s her high school? Find it all here!”

Most go like that.

Anyone could figure out where I go to school just by looking at my uniform, and the one who posted that reasons that I make about as much as the usual pro Shogi player. That’s all that’s written here. They must’ve been using my name as clickbait to get views on their page.

“It’s the boyfriend bit I’m worried about Let’s see.”

They point out that Yaichi and I lived under the same roof for almost 10 years and work at a lot of events together, so maybe there’s more? It’s all discussions along that line.

They’re obviously fanning the flames to get more views.

This is nothing but a major pain in the neck. A real pain. Ehe-he≡

“A word of caution for you, Sora 4-*dan*. Be sure to steel yourself while using social media.”

“Uh-huh.”

I pretend to be listening to Ms. Oga’s little speech as I scroll through the threads at high speed.

“Everyone’s saying Ginko Sora and Yaichi Kuzuryu are a thing. So, is it true?”

“Nah, it’s B.S. The Trash Ryuo’s a lolicon. That’s a fact.”

“Word is he’s living with a grade school girl and scouting others to make apprentices. The guy’s surrounded by them.”

“Yeah, trash like that ain’t good enough for Ginko.”

More scrolling, more hitting the thumbs up at a breakneck pace. Twitter’s pretty fun.

That is until my thumb comes across one tweet in particular and comes to a screeching halt.

“Kuzuryu’s hooking up with that Women’s League player Ika Sainokami. Everyone knows they met up all the time a few years back when he’d play in Tokyo for the 3-*dan* division.”

I tap on that tweet and a picture pops up.

“Here’s the proof. Sainokami always waited for him outside the association building when the 3-*dan* division met. All the 3-*dans* saw her.”

Ohhh?

Interesting, interesting. Twitter is tons of fun

“Pay extra careful attention to photographs, as users will often alter them or post out of context claiming that it proves their claim. They are all to be taken with a grain of salt.”

“Uh-huh.”

This is far more important than whatever it is Ms. Oga is talking about right now.

There’s Yaichi, in his old junior high uniform, and Ika Sainokami, dressed in street clothes and wearing black, thick-rimmed glasses as some sort of disguise, with her arm forcefully intertwined with his as she pulls him down the street outside the association in Sendagaya that I know so well

Who posted this JA? As in the agriculture company?

The Sub League meets on weekends. Tons of people come to the association classroom on those days, so there's no telling who took it, but I couldn't care less.

That piece of utter trash! Playing touchy-feely during the 3-*dan* division, on hallowed ground? Somebody needs to work on their focus

I scroll through the rest of the thread.

"No, no. He and Ika are over."

"Can confirm. I heard the association's board of directors and their Masters got involved."

"I'd say that Ika's more hung up on him than anything else."

"It's common knowledge among the Shogi fandom that she tried to get him back at the Mynavi Preliminaries and failed."

"I saw that with my own eyes. Ika got stomped by Kuzuryu's grade schooler apprentice."

"Either way, Snow White is out in the cold."

"Silver age is done. The elementary school girls are in now."

Silver age?!

Why am I getting talked about like some elderly grandma?!

Wait, what do they mean out in the cold?! I was there at that preliminary, too!! Why is there so much fake news going around?!

"Twitter is filled with statements that are inherently false as well as slanderous. In fact, most posts fit that description. You must be able to identify lies for lies."

Ms. Oga has been talking all this time, but I've barely heard a word of it. There's a record that needs to be set straight, immediately.

"As in Shogi, a calm demeanor is paramount when engaging in social media.

When you encounter false information, it is of the utmost importance not to get hot under the collar and retaliate using personal details or photographs. That type of behavior is absolutely forbidden——.”

Skimming through the photos on my phone, I find one with Yaichi and I together.

“Seems like Ginko Sora and Yaichi Kuzuryu started dating.”

“Look, here’s the proof.”

“Word is that she’s been to the Kuzuryu family home, unlike Sainokami and the lolis.”

Perfect! And ... post.

“Wha?! G-Ginko!! Didn’t one just tell you not to post——?!”

“Shut up! I *am* calm!!”

Ms. Oga snatches the phone out of my hand and immediately deletes the tweet. Tch

My post didn’t spread all that much because it was removed so quickly, but the chairman found out about Ms. Oga’s account because of it. Not only did he scold her, but he directly forbade me from using any form of social media. My schedule is still jam-packed, *his* skirt chasing is really pissing me off and I really need to put a pike through something, okay?

HALFWAY

She's sitting on the bed with the words bad mood practically on her shirt.

"....." (Hmph.)

After claiming victory in a drawn-out placement match that lasted late into the night yesterday, I stop by Ginko's hospital room here in Tokyo before heading up to Sendai to take part in a tournament.

Yet, Ginko's reception can be summed up in three words: the cold shoulder.

"....." (Hmph.)

She turned away from me the second I walked in the door. Worse, she's not responding to anything I say. It's more like she's telling me to get out than anything else.

I know why.

My having a match on her birthday and not being able to see her has resulted in temporary hatred.

But all is not lost!

Big Sis on a rampage used to be the scariest thing in the world, but Ginko and I are together now. No matter how icy her glare is, I have the but you still love me, don't you? card in my back pocket! The days of bending to her every whim are over! Now I take control!

Get ready Here comes the encompassing older boyfriend!!

"U-Um G-Ginko? Y-Your special someone came all this way, so M-Maybe you shouldn't ignore him?"

So much for taking control.

Seriously, my lower social standing compared to her has been hammered into

my head since I was six years old. Changing it now is impossible And terrifying

Ginko glares at me with one sharp eye over her shoulder.

“..... Not only did you not show up on my birthday, or even the next day, I didn’t get a single lousy message. How is that being my special someone? You could’ve messaged me any time after your match yesterday. Drop dead, why don’t you?”

“I would have, but the review session lasted until early this morning And I thought it’d be rude to get my phone out before we were done

“..... But you went out with that girl during the 3-*dan* division season.”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“That a quick death was too good for you. Suffer first.”

Yeesh Wh-What’s with all this rage? It’s like she’s hitting me with all the anger she’s built up over the past few years ... all at once

“I-I’m sorry It’s just, the review session ran late, and the hospital wouldn’t allow visitors at that point, so I wasn’t sure if I should message you. And——.”

“And? And what?”

“I wanted to give this to you myself.”

Now is the time to deploy my secret strategy!

“Happy birthday, Ginko.”

It’s the birthday present I found in Kobe. An item is now in play.

Ginko raises a suspicious eyebrow at the box in my hand at first, but Her eyes go wide when she sees what’s inside.

“Huh? Isn’t this——?”

“You bet. It’s the same brand as the watch I wear.”

Since I typically use my smartphone as a clock, I set my watch down on the *tatami* mat to keep track of time. Wristwatches don’t go on the wrist. Shogi players can relate.

“To be honest, I th-thought about getting you a ring.”

“?!?!?!?!?!?”

“I did! I thought about it, but ...! I-It might be a bit too heavy So I went with something you can use every day and during your matches. May I put it on you?”

“Ah O-Okay”

I wrap the watch around Ginko’s dainty wrist.

Practicality was more important than design because I wanted her to be able to use it in matches. It’s cute, but very plain.

Even so, on Ginko’s wrist it glistens more beautifully than any of the expensive brands out there. My bias has nothing to do with it.

“..... Beautiful, Ginko.”

Next I give her the words that I had prepped for just this moment.

“I want us to always stay in time for the rest of our lives.”

There’s no room for stuttering or hesitating.

Ginko has no resistance to sappy, romantic lines, so it’s super effective.

“Yaichi”

That frigid glare starts to melt right before my eyes——.

“I-If you’re going to be that insistent I guess I’ll use it
≡≡≡≡≡”

Five hearts right on the tail end! Now that’s the response I was looking for!!

..... Well, the one who actually chose the watch and came up with that line for me was Ms. Mato, who was with me in Kobe working as the match recorder for the Second Crown Title Match.

However, Ginko is just that important to me! I can't afford to have the first present I give her since we started dating blow up in my face. Getting a woman's opinion is a no-brainer.

Intertwining my fingers with hers, I ask, "I'm glad. Can you forgive me?"

"..... Halfway."

"Half?"

"Uh-hm"

She nods as her voice fades out explaining why only half.

"Because you showed up in a dream on my birthday, so I'll forgive you Halfway."

In that moment, it dawns on me that I didn't have any resistance to romantic stuff, either.

So, when the normally icy cold Ginko blushes and says lovey-dovey stuff like that, rationality goes out the window. It's super effective.

Nope. I can't hold back anymore.

"Ginko!!"

With the world's cutest girlfriend right in front of me, I can't help but take her in my arms.

"Eeek!! Y-Yaichi You can't just do that What if somebody c——."

"Marry me."

The words slip right out of my mouth.

But I'm 100% serious. I've thought this through.

"First, let's go get Master's blessing. He'll be happy for us."

"W-We can't I mean, I'm still 16"

"The law says that boys have to be 18 and girls have to be 16 to get married, right? We already qualify. What's the problem?"

"That law is about to change to make it so women have to be 18"

How is she so well-informed?

"That's all the more reason we should hurry up and get married! Time is ticking away."

"Th-That a good point No, it's not! We just can't!!"

Ginko starts trying to wiggle out of my arms.

"Don't forget, Yaichi, you have to marry into the pipsqueak's family if she doesn't get a title by the time she graduates junior high, right? Sh-Should you really be asking me?"

"Ai will claim the title. I guarantee it," I say outright. "There's still four and a half years, yeah? Actually, it's harder to picture a future where Ai *doesn't* have a title by then. You agree, don't you?"

"..... What about that tiny golden-haired one? You promised to make her your bride, didn't you?"

"Charlette is French, so she won't care if I have two wiv- Ouch, that hurts!! I'm kidding, I'm kidding!! Listen, she's more interested in being my apprentice anyway, so she'll understand as long as we explain it to her!!"

"..... You know what, no. We can't get married"

"Okay, then we can get engaged, or even a promise ring is fine. Let's just be together with the understanding that we're going to get married one day."

“..... But”

“We’re both pros now, so money isn’t a problem, right? Sure, we might not be able to move in together and announce it to the world right away, but I want everyone important to us to know before we do. The sooner we talk to Ai and Charlette, the better.”

“B-But”

“Then, you don’t want to marry me?”

“..... It’s just”

“Just what?”

What in the world is making Ginko hesitate?

I press her for an answer, but I never expected the one she gives me.

“Just, Yaichi If, hypothetically We have a g-g-girl You’ll love her more than me, won’t you?”

“Meaning I’d spoil her, right?”

“No, meaning you’re a lolicon.”

Most powerful words I’ve heard all year hit me like a truck. *No, meaning you’re a lolicon!!*

“She’d be our daughter, so what would that matter?!”

“I have to be your number one, just me!!”

This, this right here.

How is this creature so adorable? Will she die if she doesn’t constantly say cute things? *I’ll* die of cuteness overload at this rate.

“Okay, I’ll make you a promise. If we ever have a girl, you will always be my number one, Ginko. Now will you marry me?”

“..... I’ll think about it.”

She whispers quietly. Holding my hand. Blushing bright red.

We sit next to each other on the bed and go on and on about weddings.

I say things like, “You’ll grow your hair out for the wedding, right? I can’t wait to see!” and, “There are some Kanto players I’d like to invite, so should we have the reception in Tokyo?”

As giddy as we were at the beginning, the conversation didn’t last long. After all, Shogi is all we know. All we have to go on for weddings is what we’ve seen in movies or on TV.

So the conversation naturally turns to Shogi.

“..... And, once you’re in the zone, your fingers just go right to the hot spots, don’t they?!”

I recount my whole placement match yesterday with glee. I lost the Second Crown Title Match, but I’m undefeated so far in the placement matches. I’ll make it to B-2 in no time.

“When I’m well rested, yes. Looking back on the 3-*dan* division now that it’s over, I can tell that luck guided my fingers to victory more than once.”

“Especially when the countdown starts! You can’t read all the way to the end, so you have to trust your gut. It’s that trust that lets you take risks in the first place, and that’s what helps you get on a roll, don’t you think?”

“.....”

“You know, having all these matches so close together might be perfect for me. I’ve never been this busy before in my life, but having to switch gears and focus on my match means there’s no time to dwell on the ones I lose!”

“.....”

“Two titles I wonder if I can claim it. After coming this far, I really hope so

..... But, even if I do take it, I have to go against Mr. Okito again in the Ryuo Title match right away. If I lose that, I'll be back down to one title, but it's possible if I lose the rest of the Crown matches and the Ryuo Title matches that I could lose them both Agh! Nope, nope! I've already told myself not to think like that."

"..... Me, too"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to keep talking like that."

Getting to see Ginko again for the first time in a while went to my head. I could also still be on a victory high.

"You too? About what?"

"Me too The Ryuo League has sealing moves I'd like to practice."

"Huh?"

Sealing moves?

Why would she bring that up? But, one look at her blushing cheeks and I get the message.

"It's looking like I'll make my debut in a Ryuo League match If I can make it up to the title match, I'll need to know how to do sealing moves."

"I gotcha. Yeah, you're right."

It's a bit early to be thinking about that, but I took that route to the title match myself, so I can't say anything. Her Shogi is about as strong as mine was when I went pro, too.

"But if you do make it that far and I defend the title this season, you'll have to play against me in the title match, yeah?"

"In that case, you'll be getting practice, too. Two birds with one stone."

With that, Ginko closes her eyes and puckers her lips ever so slightly.

She's never openly asked for a kiss before.

That's all it took to get my heart pumping and trigger so many switches.

Wait?!

D-Does Ginko think I'm just as easy as I think she is?! No, no, I'm overthinking

"Mnn≡"

Our lips press against each other for so much longer than usual.

"I love You Yaichi! So much ≡"

I'm not sure if it was the present, the fact that we haven't seen each other for so long or talking about getting married that sparked the fire, but Ginko is really into it.

It'll be a long time before I can see her again, too My primal instincts roar to life at the thought. Ohh, the things I could do to her.

—Maybe I can?!

Now is the time to take a risk.

My fingers have found their way to the hot spots during my matches recently. Now is the time to believe in my gut. That's what gets results.

—Believe Reach!

Ginko stops to take a breath, and I use that opening to kiss the nape of her neck.



“Eeep?! Hfff H-Hey Nhh≡ D-Don’t ≡”

That’s one of those don’t stop don’ts.

And there’s no way to stop when her eyes are pleading like that. This isn’t my fault.

I slowly slide my hand from her shoulder Down.

Until my palm gently slides around a bulge on her chest.

“Nh! Don’t Yaichi, ahh ≡≡”

Hmm?

Ohhh? What have we here?

She still has a shirt on, but there’s definitely more of a bulge here than I thought.

Enough to make me regret saying that she was flat as a Shogi board or that her boobs were just a cliff all this time? For sure. She deserves an apology. I’m sorry.

“Ahh Hff Ah ≡”

I pull back, breaking our sealed lips and Ginko reflexively looks down into her lap. The little quivers running up and down her body are so adorable. How is she so cute?!

Since she’s looking down, I lean over to kiss Ginko’s ear instead. Tracing the folds with my tongue, I gently exhale right into it.

“Eeeep?! Ya ≡≡≡”

Shudder!!

It was small, but Ginko just trembled from head to toe.

Judging by that completely new reaction, I know that I just found a hot spot.

An attack sequence that can break her Silver Halo *anaguma* defense!

I advance further and further, my moves getting bolder by the moment—when Ginko’s quivers suddenly fizzle out.

“Hm? What’s wrong? Did that hurt?”

“..... it.”

It?

I lean closer to her face to try and pick up on what she’s saying under her breath ... In that moment.

Thin, white fingers reach out in the throes of passion—and sink their nails into my neck!!

THE EX

“Naghh?!”

“Out with it,” says Ginko in a low, intimidating voice as she drives her thumbs into my throat to begin the interrogation. “How far did you go with your ex?”

“M-My ex?”

“Ika Sainokami. Don’t play dumb, not after what just happened.”

“I told you we never dated, didn’t I?! She and I Ungh! J- Just played a bit of Shogi I swear!!”

“In a karaoke box, just the two of you, wasn’t it? You can’t expect me to believe that a wild beast of a girl like her would be satisfied with just a bit Shogi in that situation?”

Empress Ika Sainokami is a Women’s League player my age who’s registered in Kanto.

She came on to me at the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden, but I made it clear that I wasn’t interested. She even showed up at my apartment completely naked, but I didn’t put a finger on her. How could I? I was too terrified to go anywhere near her!

“Out with it. Every single detail.”

But Ginko doesn’t believe anything I say. Has she been suspicious of Ika and I this whole time? Is it because she feels threatened by Ika’s talent?

I thought that that feeling of inferiority would go away once she made it to the pros

Ginko tightens her already suffocating grip as her fingers bury themselves even deeper into my throat. I’m dying, I’m dying!

“Did you put the moves on her? Or did she put the moves on you?”

“.....!!”

The nurse call button is Dammit! Just out of reach!!

I thought I was attacking the *anaguma*, but *I’m* getting attacked?! That’s a losing sequence every time!! My attack My air is getting cut off!!

“N-Nothing happened! Really!”

“..... Then, how?”

Suddenly not so sure of herself, Ginko stutters as she mumbles her way through a question.

“H-How are you so good at doing *that*?”

In that moment the reason she suspects Ika and I finally clicks.

So that’s what’s been bothering her

Ginko’s fingers let up ever so slightly and I take in a big lungful of fresh air as I explain.

“Th-This stuff comes up a lot when it’s just guys hanging out. Manly stories, dirty jokes customers at the classroom say a lot when they’re drunk. And——.”

If I open up too much and say, I saw it in videos, she’ll demand that I show her the videos, and then when hot women with boobs the size of Keika’s show up, she’ll put a pike through my head for sure. That’s an easy three-step checkmate. There’d be no escape.

I need to get her off the trail, now!

“And——I learned about it in school.”

“..... School?”

“Yes. You know how boys and girls are separated for health class? Boys are taught not to force things in bed and how to lead the right way. Didn’t girls get the same speech?”

“.....”

“Oh, that’s right. You didn’t go to school very often, so you probably missed that class. That’s why you didn’t know this kind of basic stuff

“O-Of course I know! It’s common sense! I’m not an idiot!”

She is, for sure.

“..... Anyway, don’t think you have a free pass just because you’re my boyfriend now. That kind of thing comes later

“Later? How many weeks are you talking——?”

“S-Shut up! No means no! Drop dead, Perv King!!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Snow White kicks me off the bed and curls up in the blanket. My attack on the *anaguma* has failed.

After we became official, I thought I’d never have to hear her call me Loli King again, but now I’m the Perv King Oh well. She’s adorable, so I’ll give her a pass.

“I can wait, no problem. We can wait until after were married, if that’s what you want.”

“.....!!”

“I would like an even number of kids so we can hold our own family Shogi tournaments, though.”

“.....!!”

She’s squirming. Naniwa’s Snow White starts fluttering her legs under the blanket.

Now is the time to take it slow. The one step too far, and we won't be able to go back to the perfect spot we're in now.

After all, Ginko and I will never lose each other again.

CHECKING ON SCARS

“I’m coming with you to the front.”

“Say what? You don’t have to

“I’m coming!!”

It’s time for me to get going to my next match in Sendai, but Ginko grabs on to my sleeve and won’t let go as I head out of her room. Adorable, isn’t she?

“But have you healed enough?”

I’m happy she wants to walk me out, but I don’t feel right making a hospitalized person walk that far.

“I mean, you nearly passed out in your last match of the 3-*dan* division and broke your own ribs hitting yourself to stay awake, right?”

“Broke is an exaggeration. Cracked, yes, but my heart and lungs are just fine. The pain is almost gone, so regular medicine is enough. I don’t even need to have bandages.”

“I checked that myself earlier. You seem to be enjoying it so much that Ow, ow, OUUUCHH!! You’re breaking my arm!!”

I wasn’t copping a feel when I put my hand on her chest.

Okay, maybe I was, but I also wanted to check and see how much Ginko has recovered.

She was in such a bad mood when I arrived that I was worried she wouldn’t let me, but I wasn’t going to leave the hospital without knowing for sure.

And I was going to make her take a leave of absence if she hadn’t healed no matter what she had to say.

My determination must’ve come across.

Ginko brings this up out of the blue.

“Did you know that this is the hospital where Chairman Tsukimitsu came for treatment when he was young?”

“The chairman, here?”

The Shogi Association chairman, Seiichi Tsukimitsu 9-*dan*.

Even after being told he was going blind, basically a death sentence for Shogi players, he went on to become the Eternal Meijin. He’s also maintained his position in the A division while working for the association. The man is incredible.

Since he’s also our Master’s older brother apprentice, the chairman has helped Ginko and I many times over the years.

“Apparently, Tsukimitsu-*sensei* was losing his vision even before he became the Meijin.”

“Seriously?!”

The chairman turned pro during his last year of junior high and climbed through the Placement League nonstop after that.

He became the Meijin when he was 21.

That’s a record that has stood for 30 years But, after hearing this, now I understand why he was in such a rush.

“So even as a teenager, his eyes were going?”

“Uh-huh. But this hospital kept his secret safe.”

I bet the chairman wanted to become Meijin before anyone else found out. Pros won’t hold back when they know their opponent’s weakness.

At the same time, he was preparing to keep playing Shogi even when he couldn’t see the pieces

“My injuries weren’t all that serious, but the chairman still made

arrangements with this hospital for me. It's true that I needed treatment, and reporters aren't going to force their way into a hospital."

Ginko is literally the talk of the town right now.

She probably has tons of work lined up in Tokyo, and she can't turn it down because she's a pro. A safe home base in the area is a must, and I can't think of any place better for someone with her medical history to stay than a hospital. The chairman read the situation perfectly.

I get that, but

"..... I understand that they have everything you need, but you can't kick back and relax in a hospital, right? There's an inn we can trust opening up in Tokyo. Why not stay there instead?"

"Where?"

"Guess what. The HinaTsuru is opening a Tokyo branch!"

"....."

"I stayed there the night before my placement match, and it was amazing! They've got a hot spring, great food and a huge *tatami* room where you can play as much Shogi as you want! Even better, as a member of the Kiyotaki Shogi family, they'll give you a discou-ow, ow, OUCH!! MY ARM!! YOU'RE BREAKING MY ARM! Wh-What was that for?! All I did was suggest moving to an inn!!"

"I felt like it?"

What kind of messed up reason is that for nearly breaking an arm

Then Ginko adds as if she can see the shock in my heart, "You don't have to worry about me, Yaichi."

"Maybe spending so much time in the hospital as a kid does make it possible to relax"

Safely on board the bullet train bound for Sendai, I do feel a bit more reassured.

Ginko is her usual self.

She battled her way through the harsh 3-*dan* division, both physically and mentally.

But what I was most worried about was her fighting spirit.

She endured a hell that makes full-grown men want to run away, all before her 16th birthday.

Worse, she had to put the nail in her own mentor's coffin at the very end.

—Could I take that kind of pain?

To top it all off, Ginko is more sensitive than the average person. I know that she tried to run away halfway through.

—I'm the only one who knows how badly Shogi hurt her.

So I had to check and see, no matter what. To check on the scars that doctors would never notice I'm the only one who could accurately measure the damage.

But I have to say—.

“..... It's a good thing I went with the watch rather than this”

I take a small box out of my suit pocket and force a smile.

Even without knowing our sizes, I wanted to get promise rings so much that I went ahead and bought a pair anyway.

RECORD 2

供
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MACHI
KUGUI

REVENGE

“It is now time to begin. Hinatsuru-*sensei*, the opening move is yours.”

“I’m ready when you are!”

The curtain has finally lifted on the Women’s Legend League.

Ai Hinatsuru advanced the Pawn in front of her Rook before the echoes of the opening bell could fade out.

—I swore I’d use this as soon as I got another chance to play against *her*.

“..... Haaah?”

The young woman sitting up on her knees looked down at Ai’s opening move and cocked an eyebrow.

“So, that’s how it is. Revenge for the Queen Finals, is it? What a tearjerker.”

Ai’s opponent—Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

The very same player who had beaten Ai to a pulp in the final stage of the Mynavi Women’s Open just before she was promoted to the Women’s League.

—What I played that day wasn’t even close to Shogi It was embarrassing, and an insult to Master!

The Women’s King’s name was written in blood at the very top of Ai’s Beyond Forgiveness List.

“Why not? You’ve been working on your summer project, so I’ll grade it for you, kiddo. Bring it!”

Ryou hooked her finger as she slid the Pawn in front of her own Rook forward. It was as though she were signing a pact to proceed into a Double Wing Attack.

—Yes!!

Ai tightened her grip on the fan in her left hand.

She had a surefire path to victory.

—I'm going to use it, Mio.

A new Double Wing Attack strategy given to her by her best friend, Mio Mizukoshi.

Armed with the best sequences Shogi software could conceive, Ai was ready to face the Women's King once again!

"Haaaaa—..... Mngh!!"

Halting her Pawn's advance, Ai used her moves to set up her King's defense and moved her third file Pawn forward one space to make room for her Knight to advance.

Being part of the Women's League gave her access to the Shogi Association's match record archive. Ai's research has uncovered 20 or so matches that used this sequence, in which offense emerged victorious over 70 percent of the time.

She memorized all of them.

—I also know every single one of the records that Mio gave me like the back of my hand, too.

Additionally, she borrowed a high spec computer belonging to her Master's Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, to analyze each record even further and uncover the best moves available.

However she wasn't simply memorizing whatever the software produced.

Ai used her own judgment to meticulously pursue the sequences that would manifest in a match between players and followed each one to its logical end.

As if raising her own mighty tree from a seedling Ai had been completely absorbed in the process for weeks. Her early game woes had all but

disappeared.

—Even *that Sensei* said I’ve gotten good at the early game!

Dubbed the Archangel, Ryou was immensely skilled at aerial battle strategies such as the Double Wing and Side Pawn Capture. In their previous battle, she had overwhelmed Ai with her early game research and overall Shogi sense.

That kind of sense cannot be developed overnight. Ai was not foolish enough to believe otherwise.

However it was also true that software had upended over a thousand years’ worth of human experience in a single day.

Ai Hinatsuru was attempting to start a revolution, just as her Master Yaichi had done.

—I have to surpass them. Both *her* And the girl I used to be!!

Now that she had built the ideal formation, Ai began analyzing Ryou’s side of the board in greater detail.

But—.

“Huh? What?!!”

Seeing her casually slip a completely out-of-the-way piece forward felt like getting hit by lightning.

“Th-That move What was the point??”

She was at a total loss.

It was neither setting up an attack nor a move to defend. A computer would never bother analyzing a move like that.

Of course not. It was so bad that even humans could tell it was worthless in a heartbeat

“Throw you off your game, did I?”

The Aggressive Archangel flashed her jagged teeth in an evil grin.

“You dimwit. What other reason could there be for a crappy move like that? A handicap, duh. C’mon, land a punch, I dare you,” said Ryou, jutting out her right cheek and smacking it a few times for show.

“.....!!”

Ai’s right hand nearly raced out onto the board, but she managed to overcome the urge by clenching hard at the edge of her skirt.

Fight off the urge to make a move right away by squeezing your pants and read the board. That’s why all my pants have so many wrinkles above the right knee.

That was the first lesson she received upon entering the Kiyotaki Shogi family.

Although she picked it up naturally just by watching her Master before Yaichi ever put it into words for her. Even now, Ai followed that advice during every match.

“Wheeew————”

Taking a deep breath, Ai drank some tea out of the thermos she had brought with her. Calm down. Try to relax

Relax————and make her pay.

“..... Here”

Ai leaned forward and began to violently sway.

She saw the board in front of her transform from her ideal formation all the way to checkmate as her mind took wing.



that this was the best sequence.

Further still, her opponent making so many obvious mistakes during the match should have made her formation nearly invincible.

—Then why?!

Ai's train of thought went into a tailspin until one monotone phrase was uttered by the match recorder.

"Hinatsuru-sensei. Your waiting time has expired. Begin one-minute Shogi."

"It what?!"

—O-Oh, no! I used too much waiting time thinking I was ahead!!

There wasn't even enough time left to despair at her predicament. Ai was confronted with a choice.

Players have two options when they realize they are at a disadvantage.

Ignore the fact that they are behind and continuously put the opposing King in check while hoping their opponent makes a mistake along the way.



Or switch their playing style and hold out even if their opponent can tell they know they are behind.

Ai decided to——.

“..... Here!!”

She deployed a piece in her own territory with the same ferocity as slapping herself in the face.

Battening down the hatches.

“Hah! Finally woke up, eh? Still, not every grade schooler can say sorry like that, so I’ll give you props.”

Playing a move that goes against the objective up to that point Otherwise known as repenting. Commending Ai for changing course, Ryou pulls her armrest in front of her legs and uses it to lean over the board.

“Since you’re bein’ such a good girl, I’ll let you in on a little something. Why do you think you’re losin’ even though you been playin’ exactly what software says is best, hmm?”

“!!”

Ai looks up from the board and meets Ryou’s gaze.

“I pulled the same stunt as old man Okito did in the Second Crown Match. Master and apprentice, falling into the same trap. You two are real peas in a pod.”

“Huh?”

“Oh? So, you didn’t see it? Are you guys fighting or somethin’? Or maybe were you thinkin’ so hard about your own matches that you didn’t care about your Master’s title match, hmhm?”

“.....!!”

“Ha-ha!! What a surprise, the lil’ puppy dog always nipping at her Master’s

heels is actin' like a real girl for once."

With that, Ryou points to one particular space on the board.

The one that Ai had dismissed as a mistake, and Ryou claimed that she was giving her a handicap.

"This bad move *stickin' out like a sore thumb* actually only gave you a 100-point rating boost, tops."

"What?!"

Ai rose to her knees in shock.

"Th-That's all?"

"I know, right? *A crappy move like that barely changes jack, just 100 points.*"

A paper-thin shift like that was hardly noticeable in a match between two players.

"But you got all excited when you saw it, yeah? The defender messed up, so I've got an advantage. I'm sittin' pretty. Surprise surprise, it's still pretty much even."

Ai, who felt optimistic about her chances, had forced an attack.

However she found herself in a hole rather than pulling away with the lead.

Because——.

"I'm the only one who's bothered to research what happens beyond that point. You left that little mistake alone and kept doin' your thing. Do me a favor and tell me what I've gotta eat to be that laid back, will you?"

"Ah Agh"

Ai turned paler by the moment.

Software could point out any number of advantageous moves with any formation.

—But *People have to figure out how to use the software*!

“That’s the difference between real research and using software. Nobody’d ever lose if all you had to do was play the best move!!”

“.....”

Ai had no counterargument, and the match was as good as lost.

The young girl took a long moment to gaze up at the heavens.

And then—.

“That’s why I should’ve known”

That’s why That’s why She muttered like a broken record.

After seeing the exchange unfold, the match recorder started quietly packing up her belongings on the boardside table.

Except the young girl she thought was going to surrender took a deep breath and—.

“Wheeeew— Here, here, here, here, herehereherehere—.”

Turned back to face the board.

And with far more vigor than she had had before.

“Ohhh? Not done yet, huh? You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that.”

Ryou licked her lips as she reached out over the board.

“But if you think stubbornness is gonna work on me at this point, die.”

Violently slapping her armrest off to the side, the Aggressive Archangel lived up to her nickname and advanced on multiple fronts. It wasn’t long before the Women’s Title Holder engaged the offense’s formation with precise, devastating blows at point-blank range!

Yet Ai adopted a bend-but-don’t-break style of defense to hold out against

the assault and continued to resist.

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere!!”

“Enough with the here, heres, you RUNT!!”

—Be the muddy stubborn outlaw! Be gritty, be strong!!

That was Ai’s second lesson upon joining the Kiyotaki Shogi family line.

— I haven’t lost as long as my heart is still willing to fight!!

Commit every ounce of skill to each move until the bitter end. Ai did all she could to squeeze the best moves out of her brain.

“Tch! You ain’t got nothin’ left to play, so quit muddyin’ up the record with pointless CRAP! You’re wasting everyone’s time! Do I hafta put this Gold in front of your King to GET THAT THROUGH YOUR THICK SKULL?!”

Indeed, Ryou couldn’t see any rhyme or reason to the moves Ai was playing. Even the match reporter was giving the little girl an unamused glare as she sighed under her breath.

“A sore loser, eh? Just like your Master! Fine! YOU ASKED FOR IT!!”

Grabbing a piece off her stand, Ryou snapped it down to put Ai in check.

She even ground it into the board to force her opponent to realize how hopeless the situation was.

That flagrant taunt——saved Ryou Tsukiyomizaka from certain defeat.

“Hmm? Hmhmhmmm?”

With her finger still on the piece, she leaned close to the board for a better look. She never let go.

“Dah?!”

Now it was the Women’s King’s turn to be struck by lightning.

“N-No way?! C’mon, seriously? Ya gotta be kiddin’ me”

..... Ai clenched her fan on the other side of the board, lamenting the fact that her opponent caught on.

Players that realize their own disadvantage have two options. *Normal Shogi players.*

Ai, however, chose a third option.

Once the opponent knows they have the upper hand—*set a trap under their nose.*

“I-It looked like a simple check path But it left me open for a drop checkmate?”

Ryou picks the piece back up off the board and returns it to her stand.

“Got a bit carried away for a sec A total fluke, but it’s still amazing that one of those Shogi puzzle sequences showed up this late in a match. That was close”

In fact, it was a carefully constructed timebomb.

Ryou was forced to use every second of her massive waiting time advantage to disarm Ai’s trap piece by piece.

Then, with both combatants forced to exchange blows under the restraints of one-minute Shogi, a girl only 10 years of age intentionally showed her opponent a check path But Ryou didn’t take the bait. Her fingers shook as they moved to avoid it, however.

“Th-30 seconds 40 seconds 50, one, two, three, four, fi——.”

The match reporter’s voice, which had been steady as a rock up to that point, began to waver as well.

Seeing that she was truly out of options as the countdown echoed in her ears,

Ai lowered her head in defeat at last.

“I’ve lost.”

There was an element of grace in Ai’s voice admitting her defeat that was lacking from everyone else present.

VENTING

“That was beyond pathetic, runt.”

Now that the match recorder stepped out for a sec A bunch of stuff I had no idea got built up in my head comes pouring outta my mouth.

“Double Wing from software? What, did you think that Women’s players who only play Ranging Rook wouldn’t be ready for it, huh?”

My heart’s still bangin’ in my chest from bein’ *that close* to instant death, but that doesn’t stop me from chewin’ out the little punk who’s still bowing to me.

“You basically just copied and pasted somebody’s summer homework and tried to convince me it was yours. Teachers see right through that bullcrap. Worse, you knew it the whole time. Yeah?”

Hooking my fan under the runt’s chin, I force her to look up at me.

I thought she’d be cryin’ her heart out by now, but——.

“.....?! Little punk!!”

She’s lookin’ me square in the eyes.

There are no tears, not even a frown. Just sheer determination

Okay, now I’m really pissed. Can’t help it.

“Did you think you’d go on a tear like your high and mighty Master or Ginko if you use the software, huh? Think you’d trample over all of us in the Women’s Legend League on your way to a flawless title, hm?”

“That’s not——.”

“Yes, you were, STUPID RUNT!!!”

I slam my fan on my own piece stand to cut her off.

“Scram. Shogi ain’t THAT easy,” I roar again, and that little grade schooler bows as low as she can go.

Then she says crystal clear, “Thank you for teaching me.”

“

Pushing all the pieces on her side of the board off the center, the puny punk bows one more time before leaving the arena.

I just sit here, alone until The match recorder comes back with a printout of our match record. Then she rolls it up and smacks me over the head with it.

“That was so not right, Ryou.”

Rin Koiji Women’s 4-*dan*.

Since the Women’s League is set up so that Women’s players record matches whenever it’s possible, sometimes the match recorder outranks the ones actually playing.

“Shut your yap Who are you to say title holders can’t win by taking advantage of their opponents’ research——?”

“No, no. That Shogi was, like, pretty good all around.”

“Say what?”

“I had a look see at the other matches, but The whole Shogi Association was in shambles today. In one match, a veteran lost by the two Pawn rule. In another, a player totally messed up the Bishop Path and lost because she put it down in the wrong spot. Three matches ended early because someone’s mind was out to lunch and threw in the towel. Actually, two more matches ended in drawn-out stalemates, and are being replayed right now. This Shogi was the best today, by a long shot.”

“You gotta be kiddin’.”

That’s messed up. Everyone’s restless, everyone.

Now that Ginko is in the pros we're all having to face the fact that Women's players aren't necessary anymore.

Some have given up. Some refuse to admit it. Some are lashing out.

Everyone's so damn focused on Ginko that they can't see themselves anymore. That includes me

"Her strategy was naïve, sure But she might've been the only one playing today who only cared about winning her match."

Koiji sounds jealous as she looks down at the runt's floor cushion.

There are two long imprints where her knees and ankles were.

She never broke her posture, just sat on her ankles and kept fighting.

That punk was the only one in the whole building thinking about Shogi rather than about Ginko.

Even the fact that that Master she loves so much was playing in a title match wasn't on her radar She fought me tooth and nail to the very last move with only victory on her mind

"She's like the Demon King of the West's apprentice, isn't she? Even after all her research went up in smoke early on, she still, like, set a trap in the late game. Anyone weaker than you are, Ryou, would've lost. Real talk: she almost had you, right?"

"..... She couldn't have planned that. It was a fluke, that's all."

"And that was real harsh at the end, beating her like that. She's real popular right now, being in the same family line as Ginko. The Women's League needs her to, like, survive, yes? Think how nice it would be if she'd transfer to Tokyo and come to the events?"

"I know, okay?!"

I snatch the match record out of Koiji's outstretched hand, crumple it up and

dunk it in the garbage can on my way out the door without putting the pieces back in the box.

“Meanie!!” Koji’s voice follows me down the hall, but why the hell should I care?

I get to my motorcycle in the parking lot and jump on.

Then, once I’m on the open road, I shout as loud as I can at no one at all, “..... Thank you for teaching me, huh?! FREAKIN’ RUNT!! Why does she get to be the only one not tearin’ her hair out right now, huuuh?!!”

I’m the one who wants to know.

How far have I gotta ride to get away from this feeling of defeat?

KEIKA'S DILEMMA

"I'm out of options," says my opponent from across the board and I look up with a start.

"Huh? Out of ahh!!"

I won?

Really?! I won?!

"Th-Thank you for the match!" I stutter my way into a bow.

My match against Midori Ubaguchi Women's 3-*dan* just finished. Since she's a successful player who has challenged for title before, I didn't think I stood a chance.

Looking through the match record now that I can slow down and think, I was in a great position in the mid game onward. Actually, I missed a few chances to end the match earlier. From her point of view, she was probably thinking, I'd surrender now if you'd just press your advantage at least twice.

"Ms. Kiyotaki, your Shogi today was strong from start to finish. There was nothing I could do against it."

She compliments me so much during the review session that it's almost unnerving.

"Oh, um, I don't think so I just happened to luck into a good strategy"

"But your sequences in the mid game were spectacular. I can see why you managed to beat Shakando-*sensei*!"

"Th-That was luck, too Thank you."

"I have a favor to ask, if you wouldn't mind"

"A favor?"

“Would you get Sora-*sensei*’s autograph for me?”

I know she didn’t throw the match just for that, but I can’t deny that the thrill of my first victory feels a bit tainted now.

“..... Phew. It’s scary how fast people change their tune”

Ubaguchi-*sensei* wasn’t the only one to ask me for Ginko’s signature. The Women’s player who worked as the match recorder, a Shogi journalist and a clerk at the association office all asked me for one, too. Kanto professional players who wouldn’t have given me the time of day a few weeks ago are now greeting me like a cute kitten that happened to drop by. I wish I didn’t gasp in surprise when it happened, though.

They don’t want Ginko’s autograph to frame and put up in their house somewhere.

Some of them were asked by someone higher up on the chain to get one for them, others want to flaunt their connection with her to the Shogi fans on social media Basically they’re trying to boost their own status by riding the Ginko Sora 4-*dan* wave as close to the forefront as possible.

“I can’t just say no on the spot But telling her I’m on my way to see Ginko after this, so I’ll see what she says is just pathetic Looks like I’m the one getting caught up in a wave the most.”

Showing off my own connection with Ginko makes me look like a big deal. People think that I’m worth having in their social circles because of it.

“Of course I’ll sign autographs for you, Keika. How many do you need?”

Ginko wouldn’t say no if I asked. That’s why I’m the one who has to.

When Ubaguchi-*sensei* put on that fake smile and emphasized *sensei* it reminded me when I called Ginko *sensei* and begged for her help on my hands and knees.

I won't use Ginko like that ever again. I devoted myself to helping her atone for that, I swore to

Self-loathing washes over me as I take my smartphone out of my locker and turn it back on—.

“..... Oh no! I almost forgot!!”

Remembering that I have post-match plans, I pack up my things and hurry out the door.

“You, professional with the massive mammaries! You, I say! This way! Move that ridiculous bosom of yours over here and make haste!”

That voice comes from a table on the terrace outside of a café on the main street just in front of Sendagaya Station.

A young girl dressed in a cape and wearing her hair in buns like animal ears spots me and yells loud enough for everyone on the opposite side of the street to hear.

I can feel hundreds of eyes locking onto me. More specifically, onto my chest

“..... Daaamn”

“Professional? What kind of pro?”

“With a pair like that, she's a pro all right”

Excuse me! Just what kind of *professional* do they think I am?!

I do my best to hide them with my purse as I cross the street and dash inside the café.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ai! And you too, Maria. Can I order some drinks for you?”

“One such as I shall have a cola! Nix that, tea would do nicely.”

Maria Kannabe is a member of the Kanto Sub League. She also happens to be Ayumu Kannabe 7-*dan*'s little sister. This is my first time speaking with her face-to-face, but she looks so much like her older brother that I could tell right away.

Ai Hinatsuru takes one more gulp of orange juice through a straw and puts the glass down to talk.

“Keika, how was your match?”

“I won! My first victory in a league match since joining the Women's League!! This calls for a beer ♪”

I pick up the beverage menu humming a little tune when it hits me.

“Oh Sorry, Ai. How was yours?”

“E-he-he. I lost!”

She playfully sticks out her tongue and jokes around, but I can tell she's hurting. My heart goes out to her, it really does. On closer inspection, her eyes are beet red.

“A humiliating loss, that is. Pathetic.”

Maria, who tracked the match's live coverage on her phone, harshly critiques Ai's Shogi. On a side note, my match didn't get any coverage at all.

“Even the lowest echelons of the Sub League are aware that utter defeat lies in wait for those who rush forth using a Double Wing sequence produced by trending software. Such a thing is already behind the times. It's as shameful as drinking tapioca in the heart of Harajuku!”

“Nghhh I don't know what's trending in the Sub League, living in Osaka”

“True, true”

Professional players and Women's players have access to the Shogi association's match record archives, so it's possible to review matches that

didn't get any coverage online.

But it's just the match record. If lining up match records over and over was all it took to become a strong player, anyone could do it.

There's so much that went on behind each record, like the part of the iceberg that's underwater. The research, the practice methods Talking with players themselves is the only way to get that kind of information.

Many professionals live in Tokyo. That includes most Women's Players.

Being in Tokyo means that you can participate in more events and thus have more chances to pick up juicy tidbits. Just like what happened to me today, when that professional said hello. That was a huge chance for me to learn a thing or two.

"Though inferior to Kanto's numbers, professionals do also reside in Kansai, yes? Do not Drakin and Ginko Sora possess such information?"

"Master is really busy And he's always told me finding your own way to get stronger is the best way," Ai explains, but Maria doesn't look convinced.

Well, I suppose she wouldn't be. Putting it that way sounds like Yaichi just leaves her to her own devices.

"Ginko is one thing, but Yaichi's early game theory is so complex Actually, his whole style is so unique, most of it looks like gibberish"

"I-Indeed The Demon King's senses are warped beyond recognition. Not to mention his foolish idiosyncrasies"

If I remember right, Maria was present for the First Crown Title Match.

Her tiny frame trembles as if remembering that earth-shattering 7 Seven Rook promotion.

Strength is the be-all end-all in this world.

If you're a strong player, then you can have all the practice sessions and

versus matches you want because other players come up and ask. It's easy to set up the perfect environment to learn new strategies. Unfortunately, Women's players are in a position where we have to plead with successful amateurs. Practice sessions with a professional? In our wildest dreams, maybe.

Professional players like Yaichi and my father have never experienced what that's like, so it's hard to explain it in terms they would understand

"By the way, Maria? Would you like Ginko's autograph?"

It seems like slaking my thirst with beer after my match has gotten me a little tipsy, and I can't help but teasingly prod Maria a little.

"Huuuh? Why would I desire something fit for the garbage heap?"

"But she's the first female professional ever? It'll say Ginko Sora 4-*dan*, you know?"

"Laughable! My acceptance into the Sub League confirms my destiny to become professional! One such as I will not settle for anything less than the title of Meijin! I have visions of my Master's Women's Legend Award Ceremony and my being promoted to Meijin on the very same day! Who enters the professional realm first is but a trifling matter. I couldn't care less that she received Master's praise at a simple 4-*dan* announcement conference! Hmph!"

"..... The whole Kannabe family are such good kids. First Ayumu, now you, it's amazing"

"Wh-Wha?! One such as I is not to be petted! Ah! Not under the chin! Teehee ≡"

She must be enjoying this because those animal ear buns of hers are practically leaping up and down on top of her head. It's a breath of fresh air for this soiled heart of mine. If only I could take her back to Osaka with me

Wait. I don't have time to waste running away from reality.

"I'm on my way to see Ginko in the hospital after this. Would you two like to

come?”

I asked them quietly so the people around us can't hear, but Maria answers at the top of her lungs and completely destroys my attempt to be considerate.

“We shall be adjourning to Harajuku, the territory in which one such I resides! Once we have played Shogi within the walls of Master's castle, we shall then indulged is foam-topped tea and pancakes along Takeshita Street while documenting our travels on Instagram, in order to introduce the allure of Tokyo to the weeds of Kansai and that doofus who went abroad No, the splendor of Tokyo to the world! We haven't time to spend on the likes of Ginko Sora!”

That last bit was so fast, I hardly understood anything she said. She must be ecstatic that Ai is here in Tokyo.

“Is that okay with you, Ai?”

“Yep! Maria's parents are letting me sleep over tonight, and then I'm going to show Maria around the new Tokyo HinaTsuru tomorrow!”

“That sounds like fun I can't wait to stay at Tokyo's HinaTsuru myself.”

Ai's father is an amazing chef. Pair that food with *sake* from the North Coast All that plus an *onsen* hot spring in the heart of Tokyo? Talk about a treat

“Um Thank you for letting me stay in Tokyo, Keika. It was selfish of me to ask if I could stay behind my own On a school day, too

Ai sounds apologetic as she stares at her lap.

“But it's something I have to take care of in Tokyo no matter what before Master and I go to Kanazawa for the Third Crown Title Match——.”

“Oh, it's fine. Kanegasaka-sensei understands the situation and I'll keep Yaichi distracted until you get back. Take all the time you need to talk with your parents.”

She hasn't told me what she's thinking or anything about what she's planning

to do.

However, as a fellow Women's League player, I do have the feeling.

The first woman to ever become a Shogi professional—Ginko Sora 4-*dan*. Even I, who was hoping she would make it this far from the bottom of my heart, have started wondering about my own reason for existing.

Which is why I couldn't help calling out as she leaves the table along with Maria, "Ai!"

"Yes, Keika? What is it?"

—You're coming home, right? To Osaka.

Those words were on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them at the last moment.

"..... Never mind. Be careful!"

"I will! See you later!"

I watch those two race for the station like they're playing tag as I down the last bit of beer in my glass. My victory splurge is over.

Now isn't the time to get drunk.

I have to catch up with those two girls to make sure I don't lose sight of them.

“Ryuo, have you noticed?”

The Shogi journalist who has been shadowing me ever since the tournament whispers from the chair next to me as we wait for the plane to Osaka at the Sendai airport.

“Noticed what?”

“That including today’s victory, you have a higher winning percentage on defense. That’s not only true for you, but several other top professionals as well.”

Since the average is 60-40 in favor of offense, this is extremely unusual.

The thing is——.

“I don’t think it’s all that weird. It’s only harder to win on defense because Shogi strategies are built around attacking. But now software can show us a perfect defense for any of them.”

“Interesting point. Therefore the defender’s ability to determine both players’ formations is an advantage?”

“Yeah. It’s easy to lure them into your own net. On top of that, nets don’t break as easily as they used to Which means this trend will probably stick around until the offense figures out how to break through, or”

Someone creates a new sequence that even software couldn’t see coming.

But that would be extremely difficult. Someone would have to go beyond software itself.

“I see, I see. An age of defensive Shogi could be on the horizon.”

The journalist removes her glasses.

“In which case my window of opportunity for multiple titles is in tow, perhaps?”

She drops her Mato journalist persona and returns to the Women’s Shogi player Machi Kugui as she pulls the ornamental pin out of her hair. Long, silky black locks flow down her shoulders like a river.

“.....!!”

I look away from her with a start.

—Th-There’s been something mature about her since junior high

Glasses off, hair down and that dubious sparkle in her eyes.

Exactly how a thousand-year-old fox would look if it transformed into a person

“By the by, Ryuo-*san*. Over the millennia and more of Shogi history, it’s said that only the current Meijin can see moves without reading. Do you believe such claims?”

“That makes him sound like an oracle or something. Who said it?”

“Yo Okito-*Dual Title*.”

“Ahh That system he has for measuring talent level?”

He’s been using software to analyze match records from the Meijin and all the top Shogi pros to put a number to their skill and play style.

Mr. Okito told me about it himself in the middle of the First Crown Title Match.

“Knowing the Meijin, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s true. His first instincts are typically right on the money, and it feels like *he’s looking for reasons to move specific pieces* rather than reaching the end of a sequence when he uses waiting time.”

He could just be a mathematical prodigy who knows the answer without

thinking.

Ai Hinatsuru uses her incredible reading ability to reach the answer at breakneck speed.

But the Meijin It seems like he has something beyond that. An ability to warp time and space to his will, a power that defies logic.

“..... What if he actually was bending time?”

“Hm? Bending time, Ryuo-san?”

“Dah?!”

Machi’s shoulder is suddenly pressed right up against mine. What’s this smell, sakura flowers? Wait, wait!!

“Wh-What are you doing? Someone’s bound to get the wrong idea if they see us”

“Why would you care, misunderstanding or no? For we are both untaken, yes?”

“Ngh Well, yes, that’s technically true”

“Perhaps you have a lover behind closed doors, Ryuo-san? An ulterior motive for requesting my assistance in finding a birthday present for one elder sister apprentice of yours before a title match, for example? One to convince her to go steady?”

“Th- That’s not entirely true but”

Crap. She probably knows everything.

“Besides, who is there to see us in such an out-of-the-way location as this? Have any acquaintances in the area, do you?”

“Pros from the Tohoku region? Let’s see Well, there’s Mr. Natagiri. He’s from Yamagata, right?”

“From the Women’s League, Empress Ika Sainokami hails from Iwate.”

“Gah!!”

That name came up recently with Ginko, and things nearly ended horribly for me. I can't help but look around to the waiting area just to be sure.

Snickering at the panic in my eyes, the fox in disguise grins at me and says, “Nothing abets awkwardness more than the sudden appearance of a former lover.”

“She and I were never together, okay?! Rumors like that spread through the Shogi world like wildfire, so don't even joke about it!!”

“Rumors, you say? Who could've ever started such rumors, I wonder?”

Suspect number one is sitting right here. It's so obvious

“Oh, I almost forgot. I should check my email before getting on the plane.”

My tournament match ended in the afternoon, but there was also a children's tournament going on, so there was no time to sit down. On top of that, I was required to wear traditional clothing all day. Changing back into my usual clothes was too much of a hassle, so I didn't check my phone

Turning it on, several messages from Ginko pop up right away.

“Keika's here at the hospital with me.”

“Playing a match?”

“Can I mark down this day for the plan?”

Ba-dump My heart jumps into my throat.

She's talking about going to talk to Master. It's the day she will officially announce her promotion to 4-*dan*.

And, one more thing something extremely important for both of us.

“What might the plan be?”

“Whoa?! M-Machi!! You know how rude it is to look at someone else's phone,

don't you?!"

Thinking on my feet, I come up with a different plan to throw her off the trail.

"I-It's a party to celebrate her promotion. The one that the secretary in charge of the Kansai Sub League is organizing. You'll be there, right?"

"Unfortunate, for I shall be working in Tokyo that day!"

The torturer No, Machi the Tormentor slides away and heads for the boarding gate. Is this what it's like to be under a fox's spell?

The only difference is that there isn't a tail swishing back and forth between those curvy hips of hers.

ANNOUNCEMENT

I opened the front door to find Ginko and Yaichi standing there with enough nervous energy to power the whole neighborhood.

“Welcome home!”

“Th-Thanks for having us Keika”

Since we’re all basically family, dad taught them to treat our house as their own rather than act like guests.

The Shogi bond we share is thicker than blood.

But They can’t just plop down in a chair and put their feet up like normal this time, now can they?

“What’s the matter? Come right in like always,” I tease as they finally start taking off their shoes ... awkwardly.

Yaichi glances up and down the hallways before he asks me, “U-Umm Keika? Is Master?”

“Oh, yes He said he was out of cigarettes and went out to buy a pack a few minutes ago. He won’t be gone long, though. I told him you two were coming several times already.”

Dad has been on edge since he woke up this morning.

Barely saying a word, he paced through the house so much I’m surprised he didn’t leave a trail of footprints on the floor. Just when I thought he’d stopped to smoke a cigarette, he’d put it out and keep walking He can tell something is up.

“I have an announcement to make.”

Ginko asked me to give him that message a few days ago.

It goes without saying that she's talking about her promotion to 4-*dan*. Of course she called him immediately once the 3-*dan* division was over and the whole country knows she's a professional now, but there's this little thing called formality that needs to be maintained.

Good fences make good neighbors. Shogi begins and ends with manners. Its values are deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

The Master-apprentice relationship is a central pillar of the Shogi world, so manners are very important.

So Ginko coming here to tell him in person is nothing special.

The problem is that Yaichi, who is right in the middle of a title match, is here with her.

Even my dad with his thick skull could pick up on what that means.

Coming to tell their Master every little thing, how cute is that?! I wonder who broke the ice first? Yaichi, it had to be Yaichi. Ginko isn't the type to let her emotions come out. She typically lets them leak without saying anything instead (ha-ha).

"....." (Fidget fidget)

The pair make their way to the *tatami* room and sit on their ankles in the lower seat but are anything but calm.

Maybe I should give them time to work on their plan?

"Wait a minute, would you please? I'll go get some tea ready and grab some snacks from the kitchen. Dad should be back in a few minutes."

"O-Okay!! Th-Thank you"

He-he-he. Puppy love.

It reminds me of when the two of them first came to live here That was over 12 years ago, but the two still come into the *tatami* room together when

they have something to tell Master.

And whenever they have a huge announcement to make, it's usually something ridiculous. They know they're in for a scolding, kind of like kids that got sent to the principal's office.

"..... I'll be keeping an eye on them with more tea at the ready just in case they need my help. Dad can drone on for hours," I whispered quietly to myself as I put water on to boil.

What if Master objects to them dating?

"If that happens That'll be Keika's cue to step in and get him to see reason!"

Just as I decide to play the hero ...

Strange sounds start coming from the tatami room—.

"Mnhh D-Don't, Yaichi≡ Stop ≡"

"Nooope. I've got matches and you're going to so many events that we never get to see each other. I've got to take advantage of every chance I get!"

"Hey! Ya- Not so hard You'll leave a mark≡"

"Hah. So you won't forget me Yeah? There's no telling when I'll get to see you again."

"Stupid! What if Master sees?!"

..... They wouldn't?

Huh? Seriously, I left them alone for what, thirty seconds? The kitchen is literally one room over?

And I told them that Master would be back any minute.

Are they creatures that die without playing kissy-face every waking moment they're alone?

“Don’t Keika will Nhh come!”

“No problem. I know exactly what her footsteps sound like, so she’ll never find out.”

“B-But Nhh ≡ She could still peek in here”

“Then we should just show her. That’s what we’re here to say anyway, right?”

..... Did Yaichi just say they’re here to show me?

“Didn’t he say I was his type not too long ago? So what? I was the perfect woman but now I’m old news because he has a girlfriend?”

I’ve got half a mind to empty this boiling kettle over his sloppy attempt to dye his hair brown when I hear Ginko say in a dainty voice, “I’m serious! Don’t, stupid Yaichi”

She’s resisting sloppy brown’s advances and explaining why at the same time.

“Put yourself in Keika’s position She doesn’t have a boyfriend She barely ever wins her Shogi matches She’d be miserable”

What? I just won a match, I’ll have you know.

And it’s not that I *can’t* get a boyfriend, I just haven’t tried. On purpose.

“Keika will find a great guy, trust me. She’ll be fine.”

“..... No, she won’t”

“Why not?”

“..... Because I already have the best one ≡”

Snap!

“Is that the door? Dad’s home! Oh Daaaaaad!! Yaichi and Ginko got here right after you left! Don’t keep them waiting any longer!! DAAAAAAD!! Hurry up and get to the *tatami* room!!”

“!!!! ?!?!?!?”

They fell over each other, trying to sit up straight and pull themselves together in a panic. I heard every glorious moment of it.

Dad didn't get home for about 15 minutes after that. Wasn't it nice of me to give the lovebirds plenty of planning time? ≡

FORBIDDEN

“

The awkwardness among the three of us in the *tatami* room is stifling.

Ginko and I put on our best clothes and sit on our ankles waiting for Master to show up, but neither of us can say anything when he grunts his way inside and plops down in the upper seat. He even lights a cigarette, something that he almost never does in front of us.

But, rather than actually smoke it, he just holds the cigarette between his fingers and watches the smoke rise Does that mean he's in a bad mood? Is he just nervous? I have no idea.

Haaaah Ginko takes a deep breath next to me.

“Master.”

Staying on her knees, she shifts off her floor cushion and bows so deep that her forehead nearly touches the *tatami*.

“I have become a professional player entirely thanks to your teachings. I have nothing but immense gratitude for you and Keika, both for accepting me as an apprentice and for opening up your home to me, a girl who had been in and out of the hospital all her life. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Ginko keeps her voice extremely formal while getting all that out in one breath.

It kinda sounds like she's detached. Nervousness, I bet.

“

Master, on the other hand, closes his eyes and keeps his mouth shut.

Several heavy seconds pass with Ginko's face hovering over the floor when

suddenly—.

“There’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time.”

Bit by bit, Ginko starts opening up and talking from her heart rather than as if she was reading off a prompter.

“You objected to me joining the Sub League, so I was sure you would never be happy for me if I became a professional.”

Master’s eyes go wide, almost like a gasp.

“I don’t have any talent, so you didn’t expect me to accomplish anything That has always, always been in the back of my mind.” But she says as she looks up, “..... Shakando-*sensei* said that you went to her for advice to help me

When we were kids, Master was an absolute.

A pro, a 9-*dan*, a Meijin challenger.

I never knew that he panicked whenever Ginko had the sniffles and called Shakando-*sensei* to ask her what to do.

That’s that’s

That’s more like what any normal father would do. And Master was just like them

“Hearing her story brought back so many memories!” says Ginko, clenching her fists. “That day if you hadn’t come to my hospital room and taught me Shogi If you hadn’t taken me in as a daughter of this household after I left the hospital without permission given me a little brother so I wouldn’t be lonely I would still be a poor girl in a hospital bed

She squeezes out the phrases one at a time and there’s a plipping sound.

It’s her tears hitting the *tatami* mat.

“Thank you so very much for giving me a life worth living

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Ginko looks Master square in the eyes.

Whoa, I'm crying too. I didn't even notice.

Then Ginko puts her hand on her heart and announces, "I became a professional."

She could probably list several reasons why she got through the 3-*dan* division if she tried.

But there's one thing that's absolutely for certain.

"Thanks to you, Master I'm a professional now!!"

Without him, the two of us wouldn't be pros and we would've never met.

Master has given us everything important in our lives.

"..... Mgh."

Master softly grunts with a nod and takes off his glasses to wipe the tears away.

Sobbing sounds are coming from outside the room. Keika must be tearing up in the hallway

All of us cry in silence. But the prickly air when Master came in has lifted.

A warm, kind of smelly, but happily emotional vibe has taken its place. Perfect for the Osakan suburb of Naniwa.

Now.

Our only chance is right now.

I get off my own cushion like Ginko did and put my hands on the *tatami* mat.

"And one more announcement! We have come here today to get your blessing for——."

"Ginko."

However Master interrupts me before I can finish.

Wiping off a fresh wave of tears with the palm of her hand, Ginko responds, “Yes?”

“Now that ya’re a pro, thar’s somethin’ ’at needs to be said.”

He extinguishes the still-lit cigarette by rubbing it into the ashtray.

“Ya’re forbidden to date.”

“..... What?”

What did he just say?

Forbidden to date?

“It was that way fer me when I went pro. My Master made me wait ’til I got results. Said gettin’ married was absurd. The real trials start after gettin’ through the Sub League. Commit yarself to Shogi more than ya ever have! Master’s orders.”

“Wha-?!! That’s archaic! Why would——?!”

“No backtalkin’, Ginko!!”

Master slams his fist on the table to cut her off.

“Have ya forgotten ya’re still only 16?!! Romancin’ in high school?! Hah! Ya’re early by a decade or two!!”

“.....!!”

Ginko slaps my leg in frustration. That’s her way of saying do something! If I don’t, my head’ll be on the chopping block. I will, I will.

“Master. I think what Ginko is trying to say is——.”

“Yaichi! Ya ain’t a kid no more, so call her yer older sister apprentice or Big Sis at the very least! We got standards to uphold!!”

“..... Understood.”

It's hopeless. Master is two, three steps ahead and already crushing my defenses. I don't even have an opening to counter

“At goes for ya, too, Yaichi!”

“Huh?! Um What does?”

“Don't go thinkin' ya got free rein just 'cause ya got a title. It's the title holders 'at carry the most responsibility on their shoulders. Clear?”

“O-Of course”

“And if ya do get that second title, 'at just makes your C rankin' that much more embarrassin'. Gettin' into A is a must for ya, got it?”

“O-Of course it is! I'll get into A no matter what it takes!!”

“And ya ain't allowed ta date nobody 'til ya do.”

“HUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUH?!”

I'm in the C-1 division right now.

Unlike the other professional leagues, players can only advance one division per year. I can't just get hot and rise all the way to A like I did to become Ryuo.

Which means, getting there will take at least three years. Three whole years!

“U-Um Master?”

Walking on eggshells, I make sure that's what he meant.

“Ummm I'll be over 20 years old by the time I make it to A”

“YOUR POINT BEIN'...?”

Master roars back as he flips the table.

“There ain't nobody in their twenties with a wife in the pros, not a single one! It's 'cause they're 'at devoted to Shogi! Let up for a second an' somebody'll take

that title from ya! Shape up!!”

“Y-Yessir!!”

Hella scary

Master hasn’t been this mad in a very long time

I got scolded enough as a live-in apprentice to know when he was just trying to teach me a lesson or if he was seriously angry.

This is pure fury.

“My word! Take a page outta Natagiri’s book, would ya?! A man that handsome has gone his whole life without gettin’ married so he could focus on playin’ Shogi, an’ ya two are back talkin’ ’bout somethin’ so pointless”

I’m pretty sure that’s not quite the reason he’s single

“..... Ginko. Yaichi. Ya two are the face of the Shogi world. And for now, Ginko ya’re gettin’ more attention than the Meijin.”

Wheeeew Master takes a deep breath and starts talking again through gritted teeth.

“Folks like me in Shogi know ya both are still growin’ and’ll cut ya some slack. So long as I put ya in your place when ya mess up, that’ll be that.”

No matter how many titles I have or how famous either of us get, we’re still treated like kids by the rest of the Shogi world. I understand that, loud and clear.

Which is exactly why we came here to get permission to date before——.

“But ever’body on the outside thinks ya two *are the Shogi world*. Make fools of yarselves and they’ll go thinkin’ all of us’re fools. Messin’ up’ll put the whole Shogi world in a bind an’ there’ll be no fixin’ it. Take a minute to mull that over Get it now?” Master declares with a stone-hard glare even as we continue to protest. “Ya both are *professional Shogi players*, yeah? Ya may be siblin’

apprentices, but ya can't be gettin' too friendly, got it?"

"Agh!"

Those words were like getting hit in the face with a bucket of ice water.

Plenty of pros and Women's players have gotten married.

Relationships pop up within the Shogi world all the time. There are even sibling apprentices under the same Master who met while training and ended up tying the knot.

So Ginko and I thought we'd be just like them.

The difference is that we are pros.

In other words there's always a real possibility we might have to fight to the death tomorrow.

"Those two are dating, aren't they? Can they go all out against each other?"

Would we be able to convince people otherwise?

Would the quality and fairness of professional matches come into question?

What if we get consistently matched against each other in league matches? Even pros on good terms will go out of their way to avoid one another before they play matches. But could we do that living under the same roof? Could we honestly claim that we wouldn't read the other's research if we happened to stumble across it by accident?

"Hey, Da- Master?"

Keika must've felt sorry for us sitting there in silence because she comes into the *tatami* room with a fresh pot of tea and tries to help.

"They're not idle singers, so don't you think people would criticize you if they found out you forbade your apprentices to date? There has to be some middle ground——."

"Keika! Ya're the one who should be out gettin' married! Twiddlin' yar thumbs

at yar age? Disgraceful! The neighbors'll start talkin' at this rate!"

"Haaah?! Wh-What does that have to do with anything?!"

Keika takes the brunt of Master's inferno. Ginko and I could only stare at the floor and listen as the two of them tore into each other

GINKO ENRAGED

“Who does that geezer think he is?! I’ll put a pike through his head!!”

Ginko goes on a rampage of her own once we leave Master’s place.

But it’s aimed at our own stupidity.

Showing up to say “Heeey! We’re daaating≡” right in the middle of a title match is the very definition of stupid.

“I don’t care anymore! Old Beard can shove it! I’m taking a picture of us right now, captioning it We’re to-ge-ther☆, and posting it online right now!!”

“H-Hold it, Big Sis stay, stay. Calm down

I soothe my girlfriend before she rips her pocket trying to get out her smartphone. I thought she wasn’t allowed to use social media, though

“We talked about this, remember? Ai and Charlette are in for a real shock if they find out before we tell them ourselves.”

“..... I remember

“You said yourself that you didn’t want Shogi magazines to find out and publish it, yes? Think of the damage finding out that way would do for Ai, her parents and so many others. That’s why we wanted to tell them properly.”

“..... I don’t want that, but

“We get Master’s blessing first, then tell Ai and then follow with the rest of the steps one by one. You know to get married.”

“Yaichi.”

“Yes, Big Sis?”

“What about the dark one?”

“Dark?”

“You talk about the first pipsqueak all the time, but you never bring up the dark one at all. Why? Strange, don’t you think?”

Isn’t she a bit too on-the-ball?

“Does she already know?”

The lethal malice that was directed at Master suddenly veers in my direction.

Cold sweat is already leaking out of my armpits and down my back Crap.

“Now that I think about it, you avoid talking about the dark one a bit too much. While the first one, on the other hand, you never ever evereverever shut up about!!”

“.....”

I try moving my lips, but no words are coming out. This is bad. Checkmate is imminent if I make one wrong read.

The fingers that had been clutching her phone find their way to my neck and sink their nails into my skin. I stay completely still as Ginko asks, “Did you do something? Or maybe did she?”

“Noffing.”

“Yes, she did.”

Kicking myself to death hundreds of times in my mind for accidentally biting my tongue at that critical moment, I don’t even think about trying to shake my head no.

I’d have to admit to everything right here if I did.

Ai Yashajin and I would end up swimming with the fish at the bottom of Osaka Port if I told her No, no! Ginko would be hurt the most if she found out.

—This is to protect her!

Of course, I plan to tell her at some point, but not right now! Explaining the situation to her when she's stable is for her sake!!

So I——.

"I love you."

"Eeep!"

Wrapping my arms around her, I bury my face in her silver hair and whisper, "You're beautiful, Ginko. I love you more than anything in the world."

"Hff. Haaa. Eeep!"

"I want to marry you. I want everyone to be there to celebrate with us. You and me."

"..... Me too.," Ginko shyly mumbles.

If someone were to write that out, it would be really hard to tell the letters and dots apart.

She makes me say how much I love her and how cute she is all the time, but claims to be too embarrassed to do the same for me. It's not fair. Adorable, but not fair.

..... And, if she's not going to play fair, then it's okay for me to be a bit unfair, too, right?

"Have you cooled off a bit, Ginko?"

"..... Mn-hm, " she answers softly, but I can tell her discontent hasn't gone anywhere. Then Ginko purses her lips and says, "..... It feels like we're further apart now that I'm a professional"

"That's not true."

I lie to her face again. Ginko has to make appearances at Shogi events and talk with the press while I've got a ton of matches to do. It's obvious that the time we have to spend together has gone way down.

Then there were Master's conditions

Things will work out on my end if I just need to get into the A division. I don't mean to sound full of myself but, objectively, I'd say I'll be there in five years tops.

It's Ginko that's the problem.

Master said for her to get results, but he didn't give any specifics.

Even if he's not expecting her to get a title, perhaps he's talking about winning the Newcomer's Tournament or a Speed Tournament. There's a chance he could be talking about ranking in placement matches or making it to a title match.

Ginko is 4-*dan* at 16.

Considering how fast she made it into the pros, she definitely could claim a title and winning a tournament is more than possible.

It's just I went through hell my first year as a pro. I lost my debut match too

New 4-*dans* obviously have potential in terms of skill and have momentum, but so many pros stumble out of the gate.

The reason is No. There's no point spelling it out right now. It would just stress her out even more.

Which is why I pull her even closer with my arms and say, "..... Master will understand if our Shogi is good enough, I know he will."

Because we are pro Shogi players. Expressing ourselves on the board is the only way we know how.

THANK YOU PARTY

The day after Master forbade us to date ...

Over 60 people have gathered at a building close to the Kansai Shogi Association to celebrate Ginko and Sota's promotion to 4-*dan*.

..... But one of them showing up makes the celebration take on a whole new meaning.

Because the newly retired Hiuma Kagamizu is here, happily smiling—.

“Ugh *hic* H-How can you show up here looking all hunky-dory?! Go back to the boonies, you weakling!! Waaaaaah!!”

Sota, one of the guests of honor, bawls his eyes out as he runs to give Mr. Kagamizu a hug less than two minutes after the party started.

Now the speech slated for the opening event on the program isn't going to happen any time soon. The icing on the cake is when Ginko, who has been in a horrible mood since our meeting with Master yesterday, says, “Sota outranks me, so if he's not speaking, I'm not either.”

So the original plan goes up in smoke.

The only person in Japan with a busier schedule than the prime minister right now has to be Naniwa's Snow White. Considering the organizer, Nanzeki 5-*dan* (a.k.a. Chuni), had to juggle everyone's schedules along with his own duties as the Kansai Sub League secretary to get this event on the books, I imagine he's in a lot of pain right now

Well, the real guest of honor is Mr. Kagamizu.

At least 20 of the people here have either come from as far north as Hokkaido or as far south as Okinawa just to see him.

“So you guys are still kicking? Kansai Sub League vets sure are stubborn.”

The ex-Sub League players take their cue from Mr. Kagamizu and return in kind.

“You, Hiuma, are king when it comes to being stubborn.”

“Darn right! I heard ya finally bit the big one, so I had to stop by and check on you!”

Most of them were out of the Sub League before I showed up, so Sota has even less of an idea who these people are.

Mr. Kagamizu hasn't seen them in over 10 years, but he's not indulging in the union.

Of course, he's not letting them see how upset he is about not making it to the pros.

They're chatting like they had matches in the Player's Room yesterday and now they're back to pick up where they left off

I bide my time and wait for Mr. Kagamizu to finish chatting with the adults before I walk over to him.

..... Sota is still hanging off his neck, though.

“Mr. Kagamizu. What's that accessory you've got around your neck?”

“Hey, I'm the one who wants to cry, but he's doing it for me anyway,” I tease with a forced smile and he grimaces right back.

Sota doesn't get the hint and keeps on whimpering.

Laughing to keep from crying myself, I pour some more oolong tea into Mr. Kagamizu's glass.

“..... So, you're going home, then? To Miyazaki.”

“Kiyotaki-*sensei* tried to convince me to get one of them teachin' licenses so I could work in his classroom.”

“Master offered you a job?”

“Oishi-sensei also told me I could eat ’til I loosen my belt as a certified a boiler master at his bathhouse, too.”

The Worldly Maestro sure has a unique way of making job offers. But what’s that got to do with Shogi?

“Machi said she’d help me become a journalist and Tsukimitsu-sensei rolled out the red carpet for me to join the association. I’m not worth all the strings people are offering to pull. It’s a great feeling, though.”

“But You’re not going to stay?”

“I made a promise to myself. I promised that I would always love Shogi.”

Rather than answer directly, Mr. Kagamizu tells me instead.

“If I had a job here in Osaka that directly involved Shogi I know I would lose my love for it. That’s why I need some distance, so that I can still love Shogi the rest of my life.”

Hearing that, Sota looked up at him with bright red eyes and tear-drenched cheeks to yell, “Why would you go away from what you love?! You’re contradicting yourself! It’s normal to want to be with what you love forever!”

“Someday, you’ll No. I hope the day never comes when the two of you understand what this feels like,” says Mr. Kagamizu with a twinge of sadness as he looks between Sota and I.

I nearly ran away from the Shogi world when I lost my pro debut match to Mr. Natagiri, but I wasn’t forced to retire against my will like Mr. Kagamizu.

Pretending to understand would be easy.

But, as pros feigning cheap empathy is something we just can’t do.

“Ai and Keika really wanted to be here today. You meant so much to them.”

Keika is working as a match recorder right now.

Ai Hinatsuru is in Tokyo for a Woman’s Legend League match.

“They made some cookies for you to take on the plane.”

“That was nice of them. If it had to be someone, I’m glad it was those two who couldn’t make it today.”

“Huh?”

Mr. Kagamizu grins and leans close to my ear.

“..... My taste buds aren’t a fan of Ginko’s cooking.”

“..... *Doufu*,” I say as quietly as possible so there’s no chance she will hear me agree from the other side of the room.

“You’re in for a rough life, then having to eat it every day from now on.”

“Huh?! W-Well That’s true. A-ha-ha”

Since there’s no point denying it, I just blush a little and nod. After all, Mr. Kagamizu is the one who suggested the sealing move sequence as a way of getting my feelings across in the first place

He has always watched out for us and been there with a gentle push when we needed it from the day we first met.

Yet, how did we repay him for his kindness? By continuously taking away the things he holds most dear——.

“Excuse me.”

Mr. Kagamizu and I turn to face the newcomer, who turns out to be the last person I expected.

Ai Yashajin.

What’s more, she’s dropped her usual high-and-mighty persona for something closer to a content kitten.

Just when I wonder what’s going on Ai turns to face Mr. Kagamizu and says, “Hello Dear brother Hiuma.”

D-Dear brother?!

“Ah, Ai. I’m glad you could make it Your father did so much for me, so I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

“Don’t be. I’m certain my father is already very proud of your accomplishments.”

“..... Even though I didn’t become a professional?”

“Neither did my father. Of course, I think he would have been thrilled if you did make it, but” Ai looks Mr. Kagamizu right in the eyes and declares, “You stayed true to your own Shogi until your final match in the 3-*dan* division. Father would be even more proud of that, I think.”

“!! I see You have a point. Knowing him, he really would”

The person who turned Hiuma Kagamizu, a 13-year-old from Miyazaki with no connections in Osaka whatsoever, into a formidable Shogi player was none other than Ai’s father, a highly decorated amateur player in his own right. I remember Mr. Kagamizu telling me how strict Mr. Yashajin was on him in those days.

Having left my family home for Shogi training, I understand where he’s coming from.

Adults tend to go easy on kids once they find out they left home to do training. Tons of players made it to the Sub League only to be forced out after getting spoiled by all that special treatment.

Having someone around to nitpick and be harsh is incredibly important. Without several of them in your social circle, training isn’t going to go anywhere.

“Dear brother Hiuma, if you would like——,” Ai starts saying something, when suddenly ...

“KAGAMIZU-SEEENSEEEEE!!!”

A young woman clad in a sharp black suit lunges out from behind Ai and grabs hold of Mr. Kagamizu's leg. She's bawling, too.

"Sensei!! Please, don't go!! DON'T LEAVE MEEEEEEEE!!"

Murmur!!

"Who's that looker?!"

"Not Kagamizu's girlfriend, as far as I know"

"Still got game, doesn't he?"

Other attendees start cheering, but I know the truth.

Mr. Kagamizu has been teaching Akira a few strategies after she begged him for magic to beat the grade schoolers who had become her rivals.

"Ha-ha. Once I get settled in, I promise I'll play some matches with you online, okay?"

"You better!! I'm holding you to that!! If you're lying, I have no problem chasing you to the edge of hell and back until you teach me your invincible strategies!!"

Akira was about to force Mr. Kagamizu to give her his home address in Miyazaki when Ai pulled her away. "Stop this at once!" she adds while Sota kicks Akira in the shin and yells, "Go away, donkey breath!"

I don't want it to end, but the party is wrapping up.

"How about a final word from Mr. Kagamizu before we say goodbye?" Chuni announces to the crowd, and Mr. Kagamizu jumps in surprise.

"Hey, hey. I thought it was the Sub League secretary's job to end these things on a good note?"

"In that case, I use my power as secretary to assign the last speech to you, Kagamizu 3-dan."

“..... Yeesh. You know I’m already retired, right?” he complains, but I can tell part of him is happy as he clears his throat. “Let’s see First I’d like to say congratulations to Ginko.”

“?! Um”

The sudden good wishes hit Ginko like a lightning bolt. She’s frozen in place.

She probably feels guilty about putting the final nail in Mr. Kagamizu’s coffin. She watched everything today from the corner of the room without saying much at all.

Mr. Kagamizu was also very aware of her the whole time.

I saw him glance over at the corner countless times during the party. I’m sure other people noticed as well.

But no one can say a word.

It’s a topic that none of us is allowed to breach.

A realm where only the two who shared the board on the last day of the 3-*dan* division can be

“I’m glad that my last match during my time in the Sub League was against you, Ginko. I’m sure it will be with me for the rest of my life.”

Losing a Shogi match hurts.

Losing big matches hurts so bad they show up in your dreams.

But, strangely, losing when you know for certain you did everything in your power sometimes feels more like an achievement than a loss.

Walking over to Ginko in the corner, Mr. Kagamizu smiles and says, “That was a great speech you gave at the press conference. I have high hopes for you as does everyone else in this room.”

“..... Thank you”

That was like magic.

Just by speaking with Ginko Mr. Kagamizu's words turned her from a complete statue back to who she was a decade ago in the blink of an eye.

Ginko lowers her head a little bit, scrunches up her face and starts crying like a six-year-old

"I'm sorry H-Hiuma I'm so sorry!!"

"You've done nothing wrong, Ginko."

The man whose dream ended in failure comforts the girl who apologizes for making her dream come true.

It's not just the defeated. Victors walk away with scars just as deep.

That's the Sub League.

Everyone here today carries those scars.

"Actually, I owe you an apology. I heard you broke your ribs during our match. Are you sure you're okay?"

"....."

"You have to take the title for me, remember? Take care of yourself in the meantime."

"..... I will You too H-Hiuma!"

Mr. Kagamizu gently pats Ginko on her head.

Just like he did back when they first met.

Like he used to do for her when she was six and me when I was eight after he beat us in a Shogi match.

"Next, Sota. I think it's time you gave me some space."

"I don't wanna!!"

That timing was just too perfect, and the whole place erupts with laughter.

But a chorus of sobs emerges as it dies down. "Hiuma"

“Mr. Kagamizu!”

Everyone is going to miss him.

“..... Honestly, I’ve debated whether or not to go home for weeks.”

The Kansai Sub League’s big brother quietly starts his final address.

“I can’t count the number of times that staying here in Osaka and getting a job related to Shogi sounded like the best option. Actually, I was still thinking about it earlier today.”

The reason he keeps going back and forth.

It’s——.

“It’s scary ... not belonging to the Sub League anymore without being involved in the Shogi world, it felt like I was losing what made me me

Failure changes everything.

Stories about former players whose lives went into a tailspin after retiring from the Sub League are not hard to find.

“Getting up in the morning and solving a few Shogi puzzles before heading out the door. Downing a donut and some coffee at that shop just outside of Fukushima Station. Running errands or working as a match recorder on weekdays, or maybe a practice session in the Player’s Room. Then playing Shogi as if my life depended on it twice a month. These past 17 years have played out just like that. I’ve spent more than half my life in that cycle and I thought it would never end. I never seriously considered the possibility that it could, so I was scared.”

His voice wavering, a tear rolls down Mr. Kagamizu’s cheek. Sota tightens his arms around those dignified shoulders.

But——says Mr. Kagamizu with a smile.

“But I feel so much better after seeing my fellow retired friends today! All of

you are exactly as I remember from our days together in the Sub League. Just as straightforward as you always were

Failure changes people.

However, there are some who don't change. I'm sure that some never ever do.

The former Sub League members here today are living proof.

"That's the best parting gift I could've ever asked for. Thank you for giving me courage!"

That's when I notice everyone here is crying.

Mr. Kagamizu doesn't bother wiping the tears off his cheeks as he says one final goodbye with a big smile on his face.

"Let's stay true to who we are: kids who love playing Shogi. If we can, then we'll meet again someday, just like this."

No matter how many years, how many decades pass.

It'll feel like picking up where we left off yesterday.

Those were Mr. Kagamizu's last words as a member of the Shogi world. They were more than just the promise that we would see him again. They guaranteed it.

A FAMILY CONVERSATION

“No. Absolutely not.”

Mom shakes her head using no time once I finish.

My parents and I are sitting in a room at the new Tokyo HinaTsuru.

This was supposed to be our first meal together, just the three of us, in a long time. It feels weird that we’re all in Tokyo instead of on the north coast, though.

Supposed to be us happily sitting around the table as a family.

The one who ruined it was me.

I expected opposition, so I’m not backing down. I wouldn’t have brought it up at all if I wasn’t ready for it.

“Why in the world did you think I built this Tokyo branch? I did not undergo this venture so you could do that!!”

“But Mother! I’ll never win a title the way things are now It’s the only way I’ll ever win one——!”

“*Dachikan!!* Two consecutive losses is no reason to take such drastic measures!!”

“Those aren’t all! Yes, I’m under a lot of pressure after losing my Women’s Legend League match today, too, but But! I’ve been thinking about this for much longer *gaine!!*”

I counter Mom’s north coast dialect with my own without even thinking. Probably the only time the Noto accent gets spoken in Tokyo is when the whole family is together.

“..... Yes, I did say you must claim a title before graduating junior high school.”

Mom pauses to fix her kimono collar like she’s embarrassed about her

outburst a moment ago.

“However, that does not mean I condone any means for doing so. You haven’t forgotten your promise in the event you don’t claim a title, yes?”

“..... But

“Ai. What you have just proposed is nothing but an escape route.”

Mom refuses to listen to me.

“My eyes cannot be fooled. You say it’s for Shogi, but in reality you are running away from a different battle by using that as an excuse. Are you so frightened of losing to Sora 4-*dan*?”

“N-No, I!!”

“Yes, you are. Listen well, Ai. There is no denying that she has a tremendous lead. I understand wanting to turn a blind eye to reality. However, it is for that very reason that you should remain closer to him than anyone else. Accompany Kuzuryu-*sensei* to each of his matches around the country and find your chance. That is your path to victory. Yet, you

“.....”

“Have you even received Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s permission on the matter? Wouldn’t consulting him first be the proper course of action? Not doing so is no different from running away!”

“..... But the way it is now, I can’t *yamon*

“My word Where have I seen this defiant stubbornness before?”

Mom sighs when she figures out that I won’t listen to her and turns to Dad instead.

“Don’t just sit there. Say something. You were the one who gave her permission to start Shogi training in the first place, yes?”

“.....”

Dad has been sitting there quietly with his arms crossed this whole time. But now he slowly unfolds them.

And says, “I agree with Ai.”

“What?!” Mom shrieks.

Dad doesn’t have much clout because he married into the Hinatsuru family, so normally he would be apologizing to Mom on his hands and knees in *dogeza* right now. But he’s sitting straight up and looking right at me this time.

Just like he did after my Practice League Entrance Test when I asked to stay behind in Osaka

“Ai. You’re familiar with the dish called *onishime*, right?”

“*Onishime*? Yes

That question came from nowhere. I’m not sure what is going on with this, but I nod anyway.

“It’s a New Year’s specialty dish, right? One that doesn’t leave any broth left over

“That’s right. Normal food prep and boiling leaves behind juices from meat and vegetables or whatnot. *Onishime*, on the other hand, absorbs all those juices until there’s nothing left. I’m glad you remembered it.”

“I remember all the recipes you taught me, Dad!”

“Then, do you remember the most important *ingredient* for making delicious *onishime*?”

“Ingre dient?”

“I’ll tell you now. The important thing is——.”

And he tells me.

Hearing it lets me know exactly how to convey all of this to Master at last.

And it looks like Mom understands what Dad is getting at. She looks worried, but doesn't say anything.

Yes I understand.

Mom didn't want to reject my idea from the start, did she? She was just worried about her daughter She was being extra hard on me because I put so much thought into this. Because she understands that getting to be with him is what will make me happiest.

Even so, I——.

“Dad.”

“What is it, Ai?”

“Would you teach me how to do something?”

“..... I'd be glad to. Come on, I'll take you to the kitchen.”

So, for the first time in what feels like forever, Dad and I go to the kitchen and he teaches me.

He teaches me a way to express my feelings without words.

RECORD 3

雛
鶴
あい

AI
HINATSURU



GO TO TROUBLE

“..... Okay! That should be it.”

I call up to the driver’s seat as I finish sliding the last box of stuff into the trunk of a car belonging to the Kansai Shogi Association.

“Everything is packed! We can go anytime.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Ryuo. One’s preparations are complete as well,” says Ms. Oga as she inputs an address into the car navigator.

“Your route to ... Kanazawa ... will require approximately ... four hours. Please drive safely.”

And the car navigator’s electronic voice follows right after.

The Third Crown Match is going to happen tomorrow at a regular city hotel in Kanazawa owned by Tokoku News Group, the main sponsor. That means we have to bring everything. The board and pieces for the match itself from the association in Kansai, the big board for analysis, and even the boards and pieces for instructional matches.

I’ve been going in and out of the building all morning, carrying heavy boxes out to the car while Ai uses her tiny frame to crawl into the trunk and make sure everything fits together like a well-balanced puzzle. I used to do this kind of work all the time when I was in the Sub League But I still have a ton of questions.

“I’m *in* the title match, so why am I doing the grunt work? The match recorder usually does this stuff, right?”

“I have been entrusted with ferrying the most valuable pieces safely to the match. Them, along with the seven tools of my trade.”

Machi, who pulled strings to attend this match as the recorder this time,

gestures to the extraordinarily expensive pieces that are only allowed to be used for title matches as well as the container of items (that used to hold seaweed) she needs to do her job.

Record paper, the sealing move paper, an envelope, pen case, glue stick, tablet, spare battery She even has a stopwatch ready just in case. Okay, I admit she has a lot of stuff to carry.

“Then at least get one of the older members of the Sub League out here to help with——.”

I stop myself in midsentence.

The most experienced member of the Sub League, Mr. Kagamizu, moved back to his home town, Miyazaki. Word is he’s going to take over the family business The Kansai Shogi Association feels weird without him around.

Just as that thought crosses my mind, Ai jumps out of the trunk saying, “Tadaaa!” like doing a magic trick.

“I am so-so-so happy to get to work with you, Master!”

It’s adorable how she’s so excited to be coming that she had to have the extra “so’s” in there.

“..... And I’m glad to have you along, Ai.”

It reminds me of the Ryuo Title Match last year.

I was in rough shape after losing three consecutive matches, and so scared of losing again that I nearly messed up bad enough to lose everything else But my bond with Ai brought me back from the brink and helped me go on to win four straight to protect my title.

I lost the last Crown Title Match without being able to do much of anything, but I have the feeling that I’ll be able to harness the same strength that I did back then if Ai and I laugh together all the way there!

My little goddess of luck comes up to me holding a basket.

“Master, Master! I made sandwiches for everybody!”

“Ohh! One heard that you awoke early this morning. So, it was to make these,” says Ms. Oga with a smile.

“A nutritious snack that can be eaten single handed is quite helpful for long road trips like this.”

“I see! That way, the driver can eat without stopping the car! I didn’t realize you had read so far into it

My soon-to-be 11-year-old apprentice affectionately rubs her head against my arm.

“Did I do good? Did I?”

“Yes, you did great.”

“Meeow≡”

I give her a few pats on the head and she makes a noise like a kitten. Despite all she’s grown, she’s still young at heart. Adorable≡

Now then! Time to hit the road!!

“Ryuo-san. The navigator seat is yours.”

“Really? Are you sure that’s okay, Machi?”

“As your title outranks mine, my permission is not necessary.”

“Sweet! See, I’ll be going to get my driver’s license as soon as the Crown and Ryuo title matches are finished! I really wanted a chance to learn a few things from Ms. Oga during this trip!”

I’m ecstatic, but Ai is pouting.

“Hmph! I wanted to sit next to you in the back seat, Master!”

“I shall accompany you, Ai. Do not forget to securely fasten your seatbelt.”

I climb into the front seat and do just that. Now there’s a bit of a lull while

everyone gets settled, I have a chance to ask about the other thing that has been bothering me since I got here this morning.

“By the way, Ms. Oga, why are the chairman and the others taking a train? It would’ve been much cheaper to rent a bus and drive everyone up all at once.”

“One made that very suggestion, but it seems they all suffer from car sickness. Quite disappointing after one devoted many hours to acquiring a license to drive large vehicles..... Speaking of which, one has driven the chairman on one occasion in the past. Though he said something curious upon our arrival.”

“Oh? What did he say?”

“That it was his first experience feeling fortunate to be blind.”

That’s a red flag.

“Actually, I think Ai and I will take the train after all——.”

VROOOOM!! SCREEEEEEEEEE—CH!

“DAAAAAAAAHH!!”

The car suddenly launches out of the parking lot with tires blazing!

The stench of burning rubber fills the car as panic takes over.

“Lemme out! I I have to make it to Kanazawa alive! Mr. Okito is waiting for me!!”

“We are en route as we speak! Be quiet, else one cannot focus on the road!!”

“UWHAAA! The buildings are going by so fast!”

“Be at ease, Ai. So long as passengers in the back seat have fastened their seatbelts, their survival rate is more than double those sitting in the front

“You tricked me into sitting up here, did you?! Change seats with me, now!!”

I reach back and grab Machi’s arm, but ...

“Stay still!! You are being a distraction!!”

Sounding and looking angrier than I ever thought Ms. Oga was capable of, she reaches over with her left hand and slams me back into the seat. Owwww!

“A-After this match I’m going to study up and get my license A.S.A.P.”

“Master!! Please don’t make any predictions!!”

It would be another eight hours before we reached Kanazawa.

How in the world did it take twice as long as it was supposed to? The whole ride felt like one continuous chase scene out of an action movie

“I’m glad you’ve made it. Is everyone accounted for?”

Chairman Tsukimitsu, who arrived a long time ago, comes out of the hotel to greet us.

“..... I was afraid someone would be lost along the way, so I’m glad that fortune was on your side.”

He isn’t joking.

There’s also something that I have to get off my chest, so I say, “Chairman.”

“What is it, Ryuo?”

“Nothing scares me anymore”

“Is that so?”

After seeing certain death so many times, the thought of losing doesn’t scare me at all. Perhaps because my spirit died at some point on the way here.

That empty state of mind hadn’t gone away by the time the Third Crown Match started following day, and I got a win on defense.

A local newspaper ran the following headline soon after: Enlightened Challenger Claims Victory.

SIGHTSEEING IN KANAZAWA

The day following the Third Crown Title Match.

Ai and I stay behind in Ishikawa Prefecture to explore Kanazawa City for a whole day.

Leaving our bags at the hotel, we head out on the town with our hands free.

“Wow, nothing beats sightseeing the day after winning a title match! It’s hard to enjoy anything the day before because of all the sequences playing out in my head.”

“Me too! I had to go sightseeing all by myself in Hawaii because you went back to Japan right away, remember?”

“And I’m sorry about that

I wasn’t thinking of today as a way of making up for it, but it kind of is in a way.

The difference is that I would’ve come out for sightseeing today even if I lost. That condition was made very clear beforehand.

“I know you said that our schedules didn’t line up and we won’t be able to celebrate your birthday together this year, but Are you sure this is what you want? Being a tourist with me isn’t much of a present.”

“Yep! Forget about Shogi! I’m renting you for the whole day, Master!”

Giddily taking my hand, Ai takes off like a rocket.

“So, please make sure to stick with my plan, okay Master?”

“He-he. I’ve spent so much time showing you around Osaka that it’s an interesting change having you show me around instead.”

I can let my apprentice lead the way and enjoy the day without thinking about

anything at all.

Shogi has literally been the only thing on my mind for so long that I'm really looking forward to this. I take off running to keep up with Ai.

Of course, I know I have more title matches to play.

Win two of them, and the Crown title is mine. I can't take my foot off the gas just because I'm in the lead.

It's just

—Ai lost consecutive Women's Legend League matches. She needs some time to change gears

At any rate, I'm going to forget about Shogi and enjoy myself! Here we go!!

The first place Ai leads me is—.

"No trip to Kanazawa is complete without coming here! The Kenroku-en Garden!"

"This place is pretty famous"

Walking up a sloping street lined with souvenir shops, it's easy to spot some shapely trimmed trees in the distance.

Tons of tourist groups are lined up outside the entrance to the garden.

We make our way through the crowd and find a good spot to take a picture. Ai puts her smartphone in selfie mode and *flash*☆.

This is kind of embarrassing, but Well, this will be a good memory.

"Kenroku-en is a kind of strange name, don't you think? How'd they come up with that?"

Ai responds with the speed and confidence of a veteran tour guide, "The name Kenroku-en comes from the fact that all six attributes of a perfect

landscape are represented here. They are spaciousness, seclusion, artifice, antiquity, waterways and panoramas.”

“Ah, I gotcha. *Roku* means six and the *ken* comes from the attributes and *en* is the garden. Impressive

I’d expect nothing less from the daughter of one of the most famous inns in Ishikawa Prefecture. Her background knowledge of the area is flawless. She didn’t even stutter.

“Every year on November 1st, all the trees in Kenroku-en Garden are fitted with *yukitsuri* to protect them from the snow. They look like big umbrellas made of rope. People from the north coast know that winter is coming when they see pictures of them on the news.”

“Winter snow tires, ice scrapers, warm boots There’re so many things to prepare. Oh, you can’t forget to stand up the windshield wipers.”

I’ve forgotten about a lot of it because it almost never snows in Osaka, but I remember what the winters were like in Fukui Prefecture where I was born. Very cold.

And winter will be in full swing once the Ryuo Title Match is over.

The seasons changed so quickly this year ... especially the jump from summer to winter. We might’ve had a few days of fall, but that’s it.

I turned 18, and Ai is about to turn 11.

She’s grown a few inches since we met back when she was nine. Hearing her rattle off all these facts one after another, she’s well on her way to becoming an independent young woman.

“..... How nice! I could get used to my apprentice leading me around.”

Not too long ago, she’d get lost right away if I didn’t hold her hand But she’s made so much progress. Crap, I think I’m gonna cry.

Grade schoolers are so inspirational

“All right! Let’s go have a look around!!” I say as I head for the ticket booth, but Ai says something so strange I stop in my tracks.

“We’re not going inside.”

“Come again?”

“Do you have any idea how big Kenroku-en Garden is? The whole day wouldn’t be enough time to see everything. Do you like gardens that much, Master? Do you have a green thumb fetish? Lolicon and Lily-con?”

“Wh-When you put it that way, no, not really

“Then we’re moving on.”

Goodbye, Kenroku-en Garden

Leading me off in a different direction, Ai heads for a bridge right next to the garden.

“This is Ishikawa Bridge! It connects Kenroku-en and Kanazawa Castle! There’s a tunnel beneath it, so cars and people can cross anytime!”

“Holy cow, you can see for miles!”

The view from the bridge is so spectacular that it makes the disappointment of not going inside Kenroku-en completely disappear.

Standing on top of this bridge is like looking down on the city from a cloud.

Perfect for photography, there’s a couple dressed in traditional Japanese clothing taking wedding pictures up ahead. Someday, Ginko and I will just as I could just see us doing the same thing.

“Master? It’s rude to stare like that.”

“Y-Yeah O-o-o-owwwch?! That hurts, Ai! Elbows don’t bend like that! Ow! Ow! OWW!!”

“Who was it that rented you for today?”

“You, did, Ai! You!!”

“That’s better.”

She had my elbow in a judo-style lock, but finally lets me go. As the one being rented, I don’t have the freedom to do anything on my own

“Kanazawa Castle is on the other side. The front gate, Ishikawa-mon, has been designated as important cultural property!”

“Whoa! That looks more like a castle turret rather than the gate!”

“Let’s take a picture before going in.”

Ai grabs my wrist, pulls me into the middle of the bridge, leans up against my side and takes another selfie. *Flash*☆

“Okay. Let’s go in.”

“Say what? I wanted to enjoy the view a bit more”

“We’ve got so much to see today! There’s no time for that, *dachikan!*”

Scolded in the local accent

Practically dragged through Ishikawa-mon, Ai leads me onto the castle grounds. This place is enormous.

“These are what’s left of the original outer walls.”

“Whew! They’re huge. I know that this area used to be called Kaga and it was famous for growing tons of rice, so the local ruler’s pockets had to have been loaded!”

“Over there you can see the ruins of a defensive tower, the samurai’s barracks and a wall that protected the gate. There aren’t many ruins around Kanazawa Castle, either!”

“Impressive! You can still see the grooves in these big stones

There’s a real aura to them, too!”

“No time.”

“But, the auraaaa——!!”

“And, this is the Ohte-mon Gate, the exit.”

“Goodbye, Kanazawa Castle!”

Ai keeps a brisk pace as she explains why we came through.

“Most of the grounds outside the castle are treated like a big park open to the public, so it’s a convenient shortcut to get into the city.”

“The castle was a shortcut?”

“Like I said, we don’t have time, so that was the only choice. We’re going to have lunch at the Omicho Market.”

“Seriously?! The place everyone calls the Stomach of Ishikawa?! That Omicho Market?!”

The dark clouds of disappointment clear in the blink of an eye. Yeeesss!

Turns out the market is just outside the castle grounds.

“So, this is Omicho Market, huh?”

This historic area is crammed full of vendors selling every kind of seafood imaginable and there are tons of tourists.

Ai goes back into the explanation mode as she leads me through the crowd with all the vigor of a fish swimming downstream.

“This area came to be called Omicho or Omi town because merchants came along with monks from the Omi region when they moved here during the Warring States Era.”

“It’s the north coast, so we have to get some crab! We can take it back to Master’s place and have Keika cook it for us! Think of the crab cakes!”

My mouth is watering already, but Ai just sighs. Then she says, like a mother trying to discipline a spoiled kid, “Crab season doesn’t start until November 6th. They won’t show up in stores until the seventh, the beginning of winter. That’s still a long time from now.”

“Y-You would know

Are there any grade schoolers anywhere in the world other than Ai who could say exactly when crabs will hit the shelves?

That was a bit embarrassing, but All the seafood here looks absolutely delicious, even if there aren’t any crabs. There are even vendors who will cook up anything you buy right on the spot! Man, I can’t wait! Lunch is going to be awesome!

“Seabass, oysters, shrimp, grilled mollusks!! I don’t know which one to choose!”

I’m starving after walking so much already. Knowing Ai, that was part of the plan.

“What would you like to eat, Ai? Just name it and I’ll buy it for you!”

“This area is just for tourists. We’ll be having lunch at a restaurant instead.”

Shot down again. Ai tightens her grip and pulls me past all the vendors. Seabass

Until we come to a stop in front of a restaurant.

“We’re here.”

“?! Th- This is!!”

Ai passed up Kenroku-en Garden, went right by Kanazawa Castle and didn’t even bother looking at a single street vendor in Omicho who had a pile of fresh seabass to get here.

It’s—— simultaneously the best and scariest Kanazawa has to offer.

L PORK CURRY

The restaurant Ai literally pulled my hand to get to has a big red and yellow sign out front It's a curry place.

"Huh?! We came to a seafood market to have curry?"

I was sure she was bringing me to some place famous for bowls of fish on rice or a local seafood treat, so seeing this is a huge letdown. I wanted seabass

Ai, on the other hand, is as happy as can be as she nods.

"Yep! I wanted you to have real Kanazawa curry at least once, Master!"

"Well, I'd like to, sure, but This is a chain restaurant."

"This is the place where Dad brought me to have lunch the first time I came with him to buy ingredients for the inn."

"Ah"

Now I get it. Ai doesn't just want me to have a delicious lunch.

She's trying to share some memories with me.

"Great! I love curry! Local cuisine was all I got to eat during the match, and I've been wanting something different!"

"Right?! Did I do good?"

"You sure did, Ai."

"He-he ≡"

She happily smiles and closes her eyes as I pat her on the head for a job well done. So darn cute

We take a quick picture in front of the restaurant before going inside.

The seats are surprisingly full, with about half the patrons being local

fishermen and the other half being tourists.

“First, we need to place our orders by buying meal tickets at this vending machine.”

“Whoa I didn’t think they’d have so much. Let’s see: hotdog curry, shrimp curry What to pick?!”

“You’re having the L Pork Curry, Master.”

“I’m not even allowed to choose something off the menu?!”

She insists that I order the special: a large-sized curry with big slices of pork. Well, can’t complain

“I’m going to get the L Mayo!”

Apparently that’s the pork curry with mayonnaise.

We get in line and give our tickets to the cashier.

Meat starts sizzling on the grill almost right away. Then, *chop, chop, chop!* Rhythmical knifework echoes out of the kitchen as well. Maybe they’re cutting a fresh slab of pork?

And then—I come face-to-face with real Kanazawa curry.

“Oooh! They really do use a fork

Juicy strips of meat slathered in sauce. A pile of sliced and diced cabbage right next to it.

A deep, sparkling silver steel bowl filled up to the brim with thick curry.

Rice so Where’s the rice? I don’t see any rice

“Tee-heeh≡ My first is all yours.”

I sink my fork into the Kanazawa curry as my apprentice says something that, had we not been at this restaurant, could have been construed for something much different and slowly bring it to my mouth.

Gah?!! Wh-What is this?!

This explosion of curry flavor, this burst of pork juices Sweet, yet spicy

I don't have the vocabulary to accurately describe this sensation washing over my tongue.

"Whoa! This is good!! Without a doubt, eating here instead of at market was the best move!!"

"Pffff, pffff Dewishous≡"

Ai blows on the curry before stuffing a big forkful in her mouth. Then she starts shoveling in the curry nonstop.

Autopilot takes over from there. We don't talk at all. Now is for eating curry, nothing else

We clean our plates in no time flat.

"Phew Even my full stomach has a full stomach"

I down a full glass of ice water in a few gulps. Even the ice is tasty. Whew

"Haaa That was so good≡"

Even Ai looks euphoric, her smile melting with pure joy. A food that makes grade schoolers make that face? Kanazawa curry is dangerous.

"I gotta say If this restaurant had a location close to the apartment, I'd go every day"

"I heard that this chain has opened more restaurants around the country. So you can have it whenever you want! You can even have the world's most delicious curry at home!"

"For real?!"

Whoa! Shouldn't they be monitored?

"But I still think that first curry you made for me had more impact. It

literally knocked me out.”

This place’s curry is probably number one for Ai because it was the first thing she had with her father. Not only is it beyond delicious, it has the extra spice of nostalgia mixed in.

That would mean number one for me is——.

“This is great curry, but yours was the best I’ve ever had.”

“!! Master”

Ai’s eyes open wide.

They start glistening And she mumbles as if her mind is out to lunch.

“Too hot.”

“Hm? Was the curry too spicy? Would you like some water?”

“Please”

I refill her cup with ice water, and she chugs it down while looking off into space. “*Gulp, gulp, gulp*”

A little stream of water leaks down her chin.

“Ngh, ahhhh”

If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was drunk. What was in that curry? Secret ingredient?

“Too hot It’s too hot,” she repeats as if it’s scorching hot in here, unbuttons the top of her blouse and starts flapping it to get some cool air circulating through.

Sitting beside her, I’m dangerously close to getting flashes of Hold it!!

H-Hey! I’m not trying to peek! I just happened to see, okay?!

“Y- Yeah. They must have the heater on”

Glug. I take another swig of ice water to cool off. Not that anything was

heating up, though.

Suddenly my apprentice's gaze locks squarely onto my face——.

“Ah, Master? You've got rice in your cheek.”

“I do? Where?”

“Here.”

Slurp.

Something soft and a bit moist slides against my cheek.

Huh?

D-Did Ai just lick me?

“Te-hee≡”

Ai shows me the grain of rice on the tip of her tongue and then——swallows.

“Delish.”

Murmur!! People started whispering under their breath throughout the restaurant.

“Is... is that?”

“A lolicon?”

“Curry topped with a little girl?”

“Does the L in L Pork Curry stand for lolita?”

“That guy's face looks familiar Was he in a magazine somewhere?”

“The cops should hear about this”

Crap, crap, crapcrapcrap, CRAP!!!

“L-Let's get going, yeah?! There's plenty of other places you want to take me, right?!”

Since my apprentice is about as responsive as a cat on catnip, I pretty much

have to carry her out the door.

My first experience with real Kanazawa curry was rich, delicious and dangerous on so many levels.

WHAT IF?

Ai is back to her usual self after a few minutes. Whatever that was, it looks like that curry was what triggered it. That's somewhat wicked food

But my relief is short-lived. A whole new problem greets our eyes as soon as we get out of the market.

"Huh?! It's raining!"

"It sure is."

Since the market has a roof connecting all the buildings, I had no clue. The streets are soaked so it must've been coming down for a while.

Ai, on the other hand, calmly reaches into her backpack.

"It's not a problem, Master. I brought a collapsible umbrella with me."

"Oh? You really did think of everything."

"E-he-he! It rains so much in Kanazawa that people say, even if you forget your lunch, always have an umbrella. Did I do good?"

"Yes, very good."

"Te-hee≡"

I give her a gentle pat on the head and she squeals with delight. Maybe the curry hasn't worn off just yet?

It's raining, but not cats and dogs. It's closer to misty sprinkling.

Our jackets should be just fine in this, but——.

"He-he. Let's share my umbrella, Master♪"

"..... Yeesh. My apprentice is almost 11 but clingy as ever."

"Yep, yep≡"

Ai is practically hanging off my arm already. Dammit, how is she so cute?

“This street is called Hyakuman Goku-dori. This road does a loop around the middle of Kanazawa City, so it gets used for parades all the time!” explains Ai as we walk toward the center of the city.

“You sure know a lot about this place.”

“Because I was planning on living here.”

“Huh?”

“If I hadn’t gone to Osaka I think I would’ve gone to high school in Kanazawa. I have relatives out here, so I would’ve stayed with them.”

“I see This could have been your second hometown.”

Ours is a strange connection, now that I think about it.

A boy, the middle child of three brothers from an average family living in the mountains of Fukui.

A girl, born as the only daughter of a family that runs a prominent *onsen* inn who was trained to eventually take over as the owner from a very young age.

To think, those two are currently living together in Osaka

“This is where all the young people are: Korinbo! There are lots of fancy clothing stores here!”

“It certainly doesn’t look like the tourist spots so far.”

Most of the groups around look like college students, and junior high or high school students on their way home from club activities pass by every now and then.

Looking around, it hits me.

“..... If I’d never found Shogi, I’d probably be studying really hard to get into a university in Kanazawa.”

“Master, a college student? That’s fun to think about!”

“It’s because my brother got into a great university. It would’ve been a lot of pressure.”

“Then there’s a chance we could have met here in Kanazawa!”

“Ha-ha. Yeah.”

Me, in university, and Ai, in junior high.

Two students who might happen to cross paths in Kanazawa.

We might have run into each other on the street. But, maybe We might have gotten to know each other for completely different reasons.

There’s one thing I know for sure——.

It definitely wouldn’t have been as Master and apprentice.

We leave Hyakuman Goku-dori, go into the back streets of Korinbo and end up in an area that looks straight out of the history books.

“Ai? What’s this place?”

“The Nagamachi Samurai District! It’s really popular with foreign tourists!”

“I can see why It’s like stepping back into the 1700s”

Of course, we take a picture, *flash* ☆

Not a very good one, since we’re squeezed under the same umbrella. That’s when a passing older lady, a tourist probably, comes up to us.

“My, my, you have such a darling girlfriend, young man!”

“Huh?! No, she’s——”

“YES! We’re boyfriend and girlfriend!! Right, Yaichi≡?”

Ai is pressing my arms to my sides with her whole body. Grinning happily.

..... Meh, what could it hurt?

These kinds of sightseeing trips are more fun with a special someone, not as Master and apprentice. So, just for now, I'll keep that mindset and walk a different life in a town where it could've happened had things worked out differently.

"Why don't I take a picture for you?" the friendly old lady offers. We take her up on it and get a decent picture to remember today. Hard to do while carrying an umbrella

"Yaichi. I want dumplings!"

"Sure, sure."

She's even stopped calling me her Master.

I'm carrying the umbrella, Ai has a stick of three dumplings.

She eats the top one and holds up the rest in front of my mouth.

"Have one, Yaichi! Say ahh≡"

"Hey, that's a little bit much Ouch! Ai! Having a pointy stick right there is scary, okay?!"

"Ahhh≡"

"..... Ahh."

"Delicious, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's delicious."

Since when?

How long have Ai and I been able to spend time together like this without Shogi?

After getting past the near breaking point during last year's Ryuo Title Match?

Or Could we have gone on walks like this even earlier without talking

about Shogi?

I don't know. I've never thought about a life without Shogi before.

But I have a feeling that if I had met this girl in the city without ever having played Shogi she would've become special to me in some way.

I'm glad I got the chance to experience what it would've been like sightseeing with her like this today.

Looking around, none of the tourists are carrying umbrellas.

"The rain let up."

"Humph! It didn't have to stop Why can't rain take a hint?!"

"Ha-ha. It rains on and off all the time in Kanazawa, right? It might start up again."

I hand the umbrella back to Ai. She neatly folds it up and slips it back into its carrying case. She's surprisingly well suited to living in vintage Kanazawa.

Actually, the city itself seems to bring out all of her charms.

The kind of charms that Ginko has never had: housekeeping. Ai positively glows with the ability to make a happy home I look away as fast as I can.

If I'd kept my eyes on her, I don't think I would've ever been able to look away again

"..... All right! Where to next?"

"There's a bus stop just up the street, so we'll take the next one to——."

Ai starts walking as she slides the umbrella back into her backpack when.

Slip!

"Agh!!"

She loses her balance on the wet stone pavement and falls flat on her back.

“Ai?!”

She stays down and I rush to her side.

“Are you okay?! Is your ankle twisted?! Your right hand Is your hand alright?!”

“Eeep

She must not have been expecting me to prop her up because her face goes bright red against my chest.

Her right shoe came off during her fall. She reaches down to touch her foot and says, “I I’m fine, Master. I’ve got a blister on my heel and tripped when I stepped on it

“I see.”

That’s a relief.

Maintaining proper posture with a sprained ankle is extremely painful and makes focusing on Shogi nearly impossible. A blister shouldn’t be too much of a problem That’s the silver lining here.

I help her sit up and go get her shoe. But guilt takes over as I bring it back.

—It’s my fault that Ai had to walk so much today.

These tiny little feet had to keep up with me, an adult, for hours. She must’ve known they’d give out sooner or later

Despite that, she still happily led me around from place to place with that big smile.

“..... There are so many more places I wanted to show you in Kanazawa, Master We never got around to seeing the Higashi Tea District, the Ninja Temple, the Sai River, Mt. Udatsu, or the 21st Century Art Museum——.”

She’s still trying to be my tour guide Ugh, I can’t take it!!

“Uwhee?!”

She yelps even louder than when she fell. It was because I put her on my back.

“M-Master?! I-I-I can walk just fine on my own!”

“C’mon, you’re light as a feather. Don’t forget, I’m 18 now. Let me show you how strong grown-ups are.”

“But

“Besides, you rented me for the day, remember? I can’t do anything without you telling me to,” I say with a grin and tighten my arms around her legs to let her know that I won’t be putting her down. “Now! Where is our next stop?”

“.....”

Ai doesn’t say anything for a long time Then a soft whisper comes from behind my ear.



“..... I don’t want to go anywhere”

“Huh?”

“I want to stay right here Like this, forever——.”

So soft in fact I barely hear anything.

Something warm runs down my neck.

Is that a tear? Is she crying?

“Ai? What’s wrong? Your foot must really hurt. I’ll call a taxi——.”

“Don’t!!”

“..... Ai?”

“It would be a big waste of money! The bus stop is right there. Just walk quickly to catch it, okay?”

“Sure, sure.”

Giving up on the taxi, I make my way to the bus stop where Ai gives me her final command for the day: to get on.

Her voice sounded a little disappointed and as wispy as the clearing clouds, so it was a good thing I was still giving her a piggyback ride.

..... Carrying a grade schooler on my back in the middle of a bustling city while waiting for the bus was pretty embarrassing, but The other people in line seemed to think they were witnessing a tender moment and took tons of pictures

Our last picture for today is at Kanazawa station.

We took it in front of the famous Tsudumi Gate with Ai still on my back, so it came out looking hilarious. I mean, my head is floating at the bottom of the frame

The two of us laugh for a solid minute.

Ai's eyes start watering She's laughing so hard that it almost looks like she's crying since some tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Haaa One day really wasn't enough, " she sighs as she wipes her cheeks, but the tears are still coming.

"Hey, there's no rush. We can just come back."

"..... You're right!" Ai nods through even more tears of laughter.

Today was as wild as Kanazawa's weather, laughing and crying all around. Ai really does change with the wind.

After we buy too many souvenirs to carry in the shop at the station, the two of us board the Thunderbird Express bound for Osaka.

Yes. We can come back here again. Along with Ai Yashajin, Master and Ginko, too.

We'll always be together. Always Master and apprentice.

So long as we both keep playing Shogi No, even without it our bond will never be broken——.

"Master?"

"Yeah?"

"I challenge you to Shogi puzzles!"

Our first contest in a long time played out on the express train and ended with a final score of 9 to 1.

That's one win for me and nine for Ai

Feeling refreshed after being a tourist for a day, I wasn't afraid to lose in the Fourth Crown Title Match and played aggressively.

Though I did push a bit too far and ended up slipping like Ai

Amid my backbreaking schedule and extremely intense matches, the reason I'm able to enjoy playing Shogi again is all thanks to the bond I share with my apprentice.

"Our hearts are always connected even if we're apart."

My unshakable faith in that allowed me to fight my way through the remaining Crown Title Matches without any anxiety at all.

THE NEW KING

“Why don’t we take a trip down memory lane before things wrap up?”

That was how the professional Shogi player displayed on the screen of Ginko’s smartphone let the audience know that his job as the analyst was as good as over.

“Sure, why not?” said match commentator Tamayo Rokuroba Women’s 2-*dan* with a nod.

The match was still in progress.

However, one look at the board was enough to know the players were simply setting the stage for a graceful conclusion.

A rite of passage of sorts for the new king to take his crown from the old.

“In fact, it was I who played against the challenger against Yaichi in his professional debut match. Reminiscing about it now, what an honor it was!” said the analyst, seeking agreement from his audience. “But, frankly speaking, I didn’t see even a glimmer of talent in Yaichi at the time.”

The analyst scoffed; his tone harsh as he recounted that particular match.

“His early game had more holes than Swiss cheese. Not only did his mid game sequences not work in tandem, he suffered an instant death checkmate because he failed to read all the way to the end! I thought the 3-*dan* division had gone soft, letting that weak excuse for a player squeak through.”

“But look at all he’s accomplished today. How could his debut have gone so wrong?”

“The Sub League, no doubt.”

“The Sub League?”

“Back then, the Shogi association had the first junior high school professional since the Meijin at their disposal, and they decided to squeeze every ounce of publicity out of him that they possibly could. In other words, they pushed him far beyond what was reasonable. They sent that 15-year-old boy fresh out of the Sub League into our match with hours and hours of waiting time right out of the gate.”

Yaichi’s debut took place on the very same day he was officially registered as a professional player, October 1st. It stands as the earliest debut on record to this day.

What’s more, the opponent arranged for him was a handsome Kanto player in the B-1 division, someone who would have normally never been tapped for a new player’s debut match—Jin Natagiri **7-dan**.

At the time, Jin was closing in on the promotion to A. Throwing Yaichi into a cage with that beast as little more than feed was a critical error on the association’s part.

“It was akin to forcing a young sprinter who hadn’t even hit his growth spurt to run a full marathon on his first day running with the big boys That would break anyone, no?”

He-he-he-he, the analyst laughed a little too hard at his own joke.

Yaichi was so traumatized by that loss that he ran out of the Shogi association building on foot. He didn’t stop until he reached the beach in Chigasaki and dove into the ocean.

Memories of her younger brother apprentice yelling “I quit Shogi!” when she went to retrieve him a week later flooded Ginko’s mind.

—He’d never once brought up quitting before I was too stunned to say anything nice to him.

“But he defeated me with inhuman precision in our rematch two years later.”

“That Shogi It was unbelievable. He decided to start playing Ranging Rook out of the blue And that series of *gentei aigoma* at the end Block with any other piece and he would’ve lost, but he read to the right one three times in a row. I still can’t believe a human being can do that

Ginko remembered that day in great detail. It also happened to be when she first told Keika about Shogi martians.

—I’ve closed the distance since then. After all, I’ve finally arrived on Planet Shogi, too

As if speaking directly to the silver-haired girl clinging to her phone, Jin Natagiri made his point.

“Where am I going with this, you ask? Yaichi can break through any wall that comes his way. He thinks that he can overcome any obstacle *And being able to continue to believe so proves that he has immense talent.*”

“Like a little kid?”

“Yes, exactly like a little kid.”

Jin snickers to himself at calling Yaichi a kid with such spite.

“This Crown Title Match series is a perfect example. Okito brought a brand new way to use software to bear in Match Two, only for Yaichi to strike back the very next match. In Match Four, Okito resisted the onslaught by broadening his horizons even further, but Yaichi overcame that as well in Match Five. It was instantaneous.”

Then, with the title within his grasp today in Match Six—.

“And today, well Match Six never truly developed into Shogi at all.”

The ceremonial rite was still taking place on the board.

However, once it concluded it was highly unlikely that Yo Okito would ever be able to defeat Yaichi again. The Shogi had been just that one-sided.

“Do you know how the young ones in Kanto refer to Yaichi here?”

“Demon King of the West was it?”

“That it is. He never had a nickname until now. Everyone avoided giving him one like the plague. Reason being, he was so much different from every player the Shogi world had dubbed a prodigy up to this point.”

“Different?”

“You see, back in the olden days, a prodigy was defined as someone who could produce moves no one else saw. It’s like the magic the Meijin pulls out of his sleeve in the late game.”

A person who plays orthodox Shogi, but truly shines in the late game.

That was how the Shogi world defined prodigies—until the introduction of software.

“But now, what’s important is being able to play exactly how a computer would. Even when your research doesn’t line up, even when there’s no time, the ability to play exactly what the software says best shows who is a prodigy these days.”

“So, Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* can do that?”

“No,” Jin said with a giddy grin. “Yaichi, you see, goes above and beyond it! He plays moves even better than computers do. The sequences that software produces astound human eyes, but he finds a way to outdo them. Even if you don’t recognize it when it happens, try analyzing the match record at home and Yaichi’s talent will get spelled out in black and white The problem is that professionals who have gotten used to learning from software can’t find a way to outdo him.”

“.....”

“A new, stronger software program might get the best of him temporarily. However, this title match shows that Yaichi will absorb those sequences and put

his own unexpected twist on them soon enough. It won't keep him down for long," said Jin in a matter-of-fact tone that left nothing open for speculation. "Thanks to the absoluteness of numbers, anyone can clearly see Yaichi's skill for what it is rather than having to rely on vague words like ingenuity and Shogi sense. Researching with software itself has become a practice in proving Yaichi's talents."

In other words, the more someone familiarized themselves with software, the more imposing Yaichi's shadow became.

However, researching without the aid of software in the modern Shogi world has become next to impossible.

In which case——.

"Okito did his utmost. He understood the benefits of software long before anyone else, as well as how to incorporate it into his own research. He did everything in his power to prepare for this title match, even going as far as shaving his own head. Players in his generation like me have nothing but respect for that level of devotion."

"So where did Okito-Crown go wrong?"

"His opponent."

No sooner did Jin utter those two words than a shadow appeared on the overhead camera.

The end had arrived.

"Okito-Crown has surrendered. Thus the challenger, Yaichi Kuzuryu-Ryuo, has successfully claimed the Crown Title A new Crown is born."

Despite all of this having taking place in the same Shogi world, Tamayo's lack of enthusiasm made it sound like she was recounting the latest news from another planet.

"At 18 years two months of age, Yaichi Kuzuryu has become the fastest ever

to reach Dual Title status. The Meijin previously held that honor at 21, meaning his record was undercut by three full years. Along with his older sister apprentice and first female professional player ever, Ginko Sora 4-*dan*, the two sibling apprentices are carving their names into Shogi history.”

A monotone voice seemingly reading off a cue card echoed from the speakers of Ginko’s phone.

Yaichi Kuzuryu.

Two seasons as the Dragon King Ryuo. Ranked C-1 in Placement Matches. 9-*dan*.

And now, one season as the Crown had been admitted to his resume ... along with being the youngest to ever simultaneously control two titles.

The *Demon King of the West* was most likely the strongest entity within all of Shogi in existence at this point, human or otherwise.

“..... And my boyfriend”

Ginko whispered for no one other than herself to hear as she solemnly watched the seconds tick by on her wristwatch, the same model Yaichi had next to him.

“We’re even further apart now, are we? Even though we’re counting the same time.”

..... The coverage continued even after Ginko turned off her phone. Jin and Tamayo’s well-coordinated discussion had turned to dissecting the important aspects of the match that turned out to be the series finale.

“You mentioned earlier that you were Kuzuryu-*Dual Title’s* opponent in his debut What about your own debut match, Natagiri-*sensei*?”

“You know exactly how to get me where I’m weakest, don’t you, Tamayo?” said Jin after a long sigh. “..... My debut was a black mark, to say the least. I lost

to a Women's League player, no less. Everyone, and I mean everyone gave me their two cents Some even told me to go back to the Practice League."

"That's even further down than the Sub League! Pwfff, hahaha!"

"I would have loved to do just that, believe me. My next opponent was an amateur, and I lost to him as well. Needless to say, my mind wasn't in the best place for a long while after my professional debut. Even when I was doing instructional matches for amateurs, I second-guessed myself to the point of freezing up on more than one occasion"

"....."

Tamayo seemed to realize her playful jab had crossed a line, however She couldn't hide her shock at Jin's next words.

"But, you know what? A Shogi world isn't all that far away where it's perfectly normal for pros to lose to Women's players."

"Excuse me?"

"I've recently been doing practice sessions with a certain Women's League player, you see. And she is frighteningly talented!"

"..... Uh-huuuh."

Jin completely ignored Tamayo's couldn't-care-less attitude and went on to explain with more excitement than he had shown at any point during the day.

"So long as she keeps growing at this rate, she'll be holding her own against full-fledged professionals in no time at all. Actually, I take that back. I think she's already surpassed some of them."

"But, but, as long as she's in the Women's League that doesn't matter because she won't have many chances at all to play against professional players. Won't she have to go through the Sub League like Sora 4-*dan* first?"

"There are mechanisms in place for top Women's players to share the board with professionals other than the traditional ranking structure. She's so strong, I

can't wait for her to qualify for them! Once she does——."

"Once she does?"

"Some professionals other than me might lose their debuts to a Women's League player before too long."

Then Jin Natagiri uninhibitedly smiled from ear to ear. That same smile could be found on demons residing in the deepest pits of hell.

"There's nothing misery loves more than company, no?"

OPPONENTS

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting! A journalist ambushed me right before leaving my hotel

“I’ve only just arrived myself.”

The Sixth Crown Match, which turned out to be the final one, took place in Fukuoka.

“Shall we? Are you sure my choice of restaurant is acceptable?”

“Yes, no problem.”

Now that the press conference is over, I head out on the town at night.

But the very person I was fighting to the death only a few hours ago——former Crown Yo Okito——is with me.

“I really apologize for being late. Machi is so persistent

“Was she collecting material for an article?”

“No. She just followed me around for no real reason and it took me a while to slip away.”

“..... I see. That must’ve been difficult.”

Machi used the fact that the First and Second Crown Matches took place in her hometown to be brought on as the match journalist, but she also took on jobs from Shogi magazines and even other local magazines that have nothing to do with Shogi to be involved with all the title matches. Long story short, she attended all the six matches in person.

“She’s been interested in my Shogi for years now, and I’m grateful that she’s written so much about me, but

I am grateful

It’s just, I’ve been seeing her a lot recently And Ginko’s

obviously irritated that someone as well-endowed as her keeps showing up at my matches around the country She's harsh on busty girls as it is

My train of thought gets to that point when Mr. Okito comes to a stop.

"This is it."

"?! I-It's!!"

The restaurant that Mr. Okito chose to end our long battle for the Crown Title is——.

"A ramen place?"

"Yes, ramen."

Hakata Ramen to be exact. We go inside and wait in line to buy meal tickets. We're splitting the check. The Crown Title Match may be over, but the Ryuo Title Match is right around the corner. I don't want to go into the next series feeling in debt to him even though he'd normally be picking up the tab in this situation because he's the older player.

Sitting down at the counter, we hand our tickets to the cashier on the other side, and I ask, "You like ramen, Okito-*sensei*?"

"I prefer to avoid unfamiliar dishes during matches. To me, the meal is part of the battle However, it would be a waste not to venture out once the match has concluded."

"Fukuoka is famous for this stuff, after all!"

I have to *doufu* his way of thinking. You can't come all the way out here and leave without having tried Hakata Ramen!

"..... But this is a surprise."

"That I invited you?"

"Yes. You seem more like the type who would want to keep opponents at a distance, *Sensei*."

“Shogi players maintain their motivation in different ways, and I feel that a conversation with you would be beneficial to mine. If you do not feel the same, we can stop right now.”

“No, no. I was hoping for a chance to sit down and talk with you too.”

Since Mr. Okito gets under Mr. Oishi’s skin, I had a hard time even looking at him at first.

However I owe him for pushing me out the door to go check on Ginko after the first match ended.

It’ll be hard to keep hating him anymore.

“I wasn’t expecting you to say anything when we passed each other in the hallway during our first match, but When I think about it, you went into a lot more detail than you had to during our review sessions as well.”

“Researching with software has its limit.”

“I feel it, too. Software itself seems to hit the ceiling, and *magic* research has done the rounds. There needs to be a breakthrough somewhere, right?”

Take the Bishop Exchange for example.

Just like the revolution I started myself, software found a way to win without forcing an offensive Repetition Draw, a strategy that until that point was considered favorable. It’s all over the place now.

However there’s still no way to break through a drawn-out match on defense.

Even matches pitting software against software have started ending that way.

“I agree that software-assisted Shogi research has been focusing more on *how to use the software itself* rather than on Shogi sequences of late. However——.”

“Yes?”

“Deep learning software has reached an applicable level for live matches. I intend to demonstrate my findings during the Ryuo Title Match.”

“Deep learning?!”

I nearly jump out of my seat.

“..... That’s the kind used for Go, right? People always said computers would *never surpass the human mind* in that sport, but that program made it look easy”

Of course I was shocked when software overtook pro Shogi players.

Sure, I had a feeling it would happen eventually the day when a computer beat someone in chess.

But a Go board is larger than those used in Chess or Shogi, and the rules are much more complicated.

The Go world champion being defeated by a deep learning software program developed by a large foreign IT corporation was broadcast in real time and shocked the whole world.

A.I. is going to steal all our jobs!!

That’s all that was on the news all over the world, and even the Meijin himself went abroad to get some firsthand experience with deep learning

“So, just how strong is Shogi deep learning software?”

“Incredibly. Particularly so in early game expression.”

Okito-*sensei* looks straight into my eyes as he throws my brain for a loop.

“I expect it to surpass a 5000 rating within the next six months.”

“F-!”

He’s not lying. I can tell by the look in his eyes.

“..... 5000? Then it’s”

“When I designed my talent rating system, I set 5000 as the base maximum. Only a god could ever reach that rating.”

Okito-*sensei* continues as if presenting his research for an academic board.

“According to my own system, the Meijin’s rating is 3400. Yours is basically the same. A-division players such as myself tend to be around 3300. Software that works with the limitations of a CPU maxes out at 4600. However, GPU-based deep learning software will have the potential to surpass 5000 within the next six months.”

I’m not really sure what all those computer terms mean.

Just that something big will be here in half a year. I understand that part loud and clear.

“What’s wrong? You’re shaking Then this is despairing news to you as well?”

“No.”

It means that godly software is on the cusp of sparking a revolution.

Shogi senses that have been carefully honed with years of practice will become meaningless in an instant I’m sure that will scare some pros.

But, as for me——.

“I’m more excited than anything. I get to go up against a stronger you after a god taught you how to play.”

“.....”

Okito-*sensei*’s eyes open in shock. He goes silent just as if someone played a movie he never saw coming.

“Is something wrong, *Sensei*? You’re being very quiet”

“You are the second person I have spoken to about this. The first’s reaction was remarkably similar to yours.”

“I’m the second? Who was the first?”

“The Meijin.”

“Really?! Wh-What did he say?!”

“If a deity is on the way, I hope it will grace me with the opportunity to play against it as soon as possible.”

Whooooaaa

“..... He would say that He definitely would”

Words straight out of a berserker’s mouth. Away from the board, the Meijin is one of the few members of the Shogi world who can function in normal society. But when he’s playing, the guy is more dangerous than any of us.

Chances are he’ll incorporate those new ideas before anyone else and become so strong that no one will have a prayer against him. He’d become an actual god, basically.

And I’d like to go in head first.

That way his Shogi will be so good it’ll make me go numb like the last Ryuo Title Match!!

There’s fire in my veins just thinking about it. I gulp down some ice water to cool off.

Hot! Intense!!

“But *Sensei*? Wouldn’t it have been advantageous for you to hide that from me since we’re about to play another series of matches? Why are you telling me so much?”

“Perhaps because I have a son about your age.”

The cup of ice water slips out of my hand.

“..... You have a son?”

“Despite never having married, yes.”

That shocking revelation comes out like an afterthought.

I-It’s a good thing I found out *after* the Crown Title Match finished If it happened during the series, I don’t think I could’ve focused on Shogi This is even more of a shock than that 5000-rating software

“His mother must’ve understood that I would not make a good family man. She never notified me of his birth, so I only became aware of the situation recently. In fact, you are the only person within the Shogi world I have spoken to on this matter.”

“When did you find out?”

“Two years ago, give or take. He became a professional player not long before you did.”

“.....?”

A big bowl of ramen with pork slices floating on the noodles gets set down in front of me, but now’s not the time for that.

“He’s a pro?!”

“Yes, and...? You should eat before the noodles get soggy.”

Completely ignoring the fact that my whole world just got turned upside down, Okito-sensei takes a quick picture of his ramen before slurping down the noodles.

Who is it? I wanna know Who cares about ramen?

“Your chopsticks are awfully still. Is it not to your liking?”

“I can’t taste anything!”

“Fortunate. I didn’t think something this subpar would be served.”

Despite saying so, Okito-sensei downs the rest of the soup and takes a picture of the empty bowl. Is he going to write a review?

“..... What’s it like? Being a parent.”

I have so many questions to ask, but That’s the one that came out. Maybe all this thinking about what will happen with Ginko has me looking for answers.

“A future.”

“What?”

“When I awoke in a hospital after attempting to take my own life, a woman I had once lived with many years ago appeared at my bedside. She said, *I have raised your child. Pay me the child support you owe.*”

“.....”

“As I had recently put all my financial affairs in order, I knew that producing a sum that substantial right away was out of the question. When I told her so, she responded, *I don’t care how many years it takes, just make sure to pay.*”

I’ll be the first to admit I’m not the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I could tell that woman wasn’t actually asking for him to pay child support.

“Shogi is the only means a person like myself has to make money. So now I live by fighting to see tomorrow. That is my reason to keep going.”

“So, you’re saying that having a son gave you a future?”

“Every day is a battle against time once someone reaches my age. Things I was capable of yesterday aren’t possible anymore. Maintaining my own status quo requires energy. Constantly living with that knowledge takes a steep toll on mental stamina. Reasons to keep pressing on fade away. That’s especially true in this competitive world.”

Okito-sensei continues, the words rolling off his tongue one after another. But there is a warmth to them that was missing before.

“Children, on the other hand, become able to do things one day that they couldn’t do the day before. They don’t regress. Watching someone so similar to myself grow right before my eyes It makes me excited for the future.”

Something close to a smile appears on *Sensei*'s face and he asks me, "I would think that you, with a young live-in apprentice, would understand that sentiment in greater detail than I?"

"Well you may be right."

We share a grin and clink our ice water glasses together.

That *clink* became the opening gong a fitting indicator that the seven-match Ryuo Title series is officially underway.

A rival and girlfriend who grew up along with me like a sister.

A young, talented apprentice beaming with enthusiasm.

And—an arch nemesis who pushed me hard enough to reach the realm of the gods.

The stars aligned perfectly for me as a Shogi player, and I can feel it now more than ever.

Feel that I'm on track to become stronger still.

EXCLUSIVE

My life has been a constant loop between Tokyo and Osaka for weeks now.

“Why not rent a cheap apartment? Or you could follow the Ryuo’s example and reserve a room for yourself at the newly established Tokyo HinaTsuru Inn?”

“No. It’s easier for me to relax here.”

That came out a bit sharper than I intended.

So I add lightheartedly, “I was a sickly girl growing up and spent most of my time in a hospital. Maybe that nostalgia has something to do with it.”

I spend more time in this hospital than at my parent’s house these days.

Right now, there’s one other person in my room with me.

“You are spending a great deal of time giving interviews to reporters and attending events when your debut opponent, let alone the date of the match, has yet to be decided. Is this your first time experiencing such an intense schedule, Sora-sensei?”

Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui. Penname: Mato.

When she approached me for an interview I agreed on one condition.

One on one. In other words, it had to be exclusive.

“I had matches at least once every two weeks while in the Sub League, so going this long without one is new to me.”

Both of us are being as polite as possible as we feel each other out. It’s been a very long time since we spoke for more than a few moments at once.

We met 10 years ago.

But since we never spoke outside of work, this is the only way we know how to converse.

“On the other hand, I’ve never been able to reflect on my own Shogi to this extent before.”

“Knowing your opponent’s identity distracts your focus?”

“Yes, which is why I’ve spent this time away from the board using new study methods to improve. A long battle as a professional awaits, and I need to be ready for it.”

“Specifically, what methods have you employed?”

“Mainly Shogi puzzles lately.”

“Puzzles you say?” she repeats questioningly.

I probably would’ve done the same thing not too long ago because I thought Shogi puzzles were pointless.

“An acquaintance of mine gave me a puzzle toward the end of the 3-*dan* division season. It was constantly in my head The very same sequence appeared in the late game of my final match——.”

“A puzzle sequence materializing in an actual match?! Wh-What an amazing coincidence!”

“I think it was just luck. But I also think the reason why I could take advantage of that one in a million chance is because I had gotten stronger. That was the first time I’ve ever felt confident in my abilities”

Planet Shogi.

A place that I’ve idolized for as long as I can remember, a far-off entity.

In my eyes, that Shogi puzzle was the ticket that allowed me to visit there for the first time.

Now I’m searching through more puzzles to find the key to becoming one of the Shogi Martians myself.

And, so I don’t forget what that overarching Shogi sense felt like when I was

there——

“..... Another reason is because I’m too busy now to do much more than Shogi puzzles. It’s not as easy as it used to be to go out and find an opponent to practice with.”

I haven’t walked around outside on my own in months.

The thought that I might never be able to again sends a chill down my spine.

“As a member of the media please allow me to apologize on behalf of us all.”

“I naturally stick out, so fault partially lies with me I guess you could say I’ve given up trying to do anything about it. >But, then again——.”

I curl my mouth into a sarcastic sneer.

“If a certain someone hadn’t gifted me the nickname *Naniwa’s Snow White*, I might have lived a more peaceful life thus far.”

“He-he-he My apologies.”

Shades of a fox pass over the face of the one who named me.

“Public interest has shifted to how you will make your debut as Sora 4-*dan*. The possibilities, as of now, include defending your title as Women’s Throne, but——.”

“Wouldn’t the Ryuo League make more sense? I’m the first female to become a professional, so logically my debut should come with competing for one of the seven professional titles.”

“An excellent point. Considering the time of year, the possibility of just that is fairly high in my opinion.”

“In which case, I would be placed in the lowest bracket. Other players in Class 6 are either newer players like myself or older players who are losing their touch. I expect one of them to be my opponent.”

“Nonprofessionals, such as the Amateur Ryuo Tournament champion, are also a possibility, though slim.”

Called the *pinnacle of humanity*, amateur and Women’s Shogi players can qualify to compete in the Ryuo League, not just professionals. The way the rules are now, literally anyone can become the Dragon King Ryuo.

..... Well, not that they realistically stand a chance.

“In the event that you do rise through the ranks in the Ryuo League——.”

Machi takes off her glasses and removes the pin in her hair.

Then she switches off the microphone and we have our first conversation that doesn’t involve work, ever.

“You shall finally have your long-awaited match against Ryuo-san, yes? Share the same stage.”

“..... Uh-huh.”

“That speech you gave at the press conference upon becoming 4-*dan*, it was inspirational. A girl, boldly declaring she wants a professional title for one and all to hear. Those words granted me a great deal of courage,” she says with the face of a Shogi player. “But, coming from you, I found them to be rather curious. There was no doubt in my mind that you would say something more along the lines of *I want to challenge the Ryuo and sit across the board from my younger brother apprentice.*”

“!! That’s”

It took everything I have to squeeze out an answer.

“..... That’s because the gap has only gotten wider since that night”

This is the reason why I wanted the interview to be exclusive.

It’s also why Machi wanted to interview me in the first place.

To——pick up where we left off *that night*.

It was last year after the seventh Ryuo Title Match.

Right after Yaichi successfully defended his title against the Meijin, she and I sat down for a short chat.

“What I really want to do with Yaichi is play Shogi.”

I wasn't lying to her when I said so.

But before telling her that, I also said this:

“I love Yaichi.”

I want to hold his hand and go out on the town. I want to go to the movie theater with him, go to the beach with him and do all sorts of things together. Not as siblings, but as a couple That's what I told her.

“That night, I I only said those things because I was talking to you, Machi. Had anyone else asked that question, I would've refused to answer. But it's not because I trust you that much, it's——.”

“Oh, I already know. Tightening the reins, yes?”

“..... Uh-huh.”

I repent for that.

Just like the way I used dirty off-the-board tactics to beat her the first time we played

“You are beautiful, smart and have very strong Shogi Everything that *he* likes. And I felt that you also have feelings for——.”

“Why, yes.”

She nods without missing a beat. Those words are deafening.

“But once I became aware that I stood no chance against you, I sealed those feelings within the very deepest corner of my heart, and with a tight lid. Much like an *anaguma*,” says the most feared *anaguma* formation user in all of Women's Shogi with a forlorn twinge in her eyes.

“Fear has kept me from venturing forth from a safe location, fear of the pain that might come. Thus I have chosen the path of the bystander. My defeat was certain before I realized it. I have been unable to seize a single chance that has come within reach.”

“Machi

“He-he No matter how I excel with the *anaguma*, it serves no purpose in romance.”

The *anaguma*’s defense is thick. There was a time when I wholeheartedly believed in that sturdy shield.

But after seeing how strong a more direct approach without fear of getting hurt is with my own eyes, I changed my way of thinking.

“B-But, I think *anaguma* is a great strategy for Ranging Rook.”

I awkwardly attempt to change the subject to hide the relief washing over me.

“Software programs don’t seem to think so, but it’s my go-to formation when I need it

“Undeniably. In the clash of human beings, the *anaguma* is the correct course of action.”

“I hate it, you know. They’re over there in their safe little corner just waiting for me to mess up and turn the tables.”

“Perhaps the tables will be turned if a quarrel between Ryuo-san and yourself passes the point of no return?” Machi says with an impish grin as she glances down at my wrist. “That watch.”

“Huh?”

“It suits you marvelously well. A birthday present, no doubt?”

“..... Heh. I thought it was a bit too perfect for that idiot to come up with on his own

“I do hope you will think more fondly of this gift than the last.”

“..... Yes. I plan on taking it with me to my debut.”

In the past, I would’ve torn this watch off my wrist and thrown it in the trash out of jealousy.

But not now.

I’m glad I had a chance to talk to Machi before my debut.

“*He* put the watch on for me. I’ve kept it on ever since.”

“Never once removing it?”

“Never.”

“.....”

Machi had the air of a Shogi player up until that point, but now a journalistic glimmer is shining through. I’ve said too much.

“Ginko. You may be barking up the wrong tree, in a sense. Do you see Sho——?”

Just then.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Our conversation gets interrupted by someone knocking on my hospital room door. Machi hurriedly fixes her hair and puts her glasses back on.

“Come in.”

“Pardon the interruption,” says Sasari Oga Women’s 1-*dan*, and she steps inside.

And right behind her, with his hand on her shoulder is——.

“Chairman? Did I miss something on the schedule?”

“This is important, so I wanted to bring it to you in person.”

“.....!!”

My heart leaps so high, I almost choke.

A match notification!

“Congratulations, Ginko. It brings me great joy to be able to give one who was once so small her first match notification as a professional Shogi player.”

I’m used to seeing that envelope, but This time there’s something different about it. Machi has completely reverted to journalist mode now that she happened to be here to witness a once-in-a-lifetime commemoration and even has her camera ready.

“You have truly worked very hard to reach this point.”

The chairman’s voice trembles ever so slightly, which is unusual for him. So is the warm tone.

“.....! Chairman Tsukimitsu Thank you ... very much”

I knew that he had always been looking out for me.

But, considering his position, I can count the number of times he’s been openly kind to me like this on the one hand

Tears are building. I do everything I can to keep them back as I take the envelope from the chairman’s outstretched hand.

Then he tells me, “I hope you can play to your usual standard.”

“.....?”

Something feels off about those words, so I reflexively looked up to his face.

However both of his eyes are clenched tightly closed. I can’t find any sliver of emotion or expression of any kind.

“Sora 4-*dan*. Use the scissors.”

“..... Thank you.”

I will my facial muscles to relax as I take the scissors from her.

Calm down Calm down

But, pathetic as it is, my fingers tremble so much, I can't cut the envelope open no matter how many times I try.

Mato lowers her camera upon seeing that.

"Shall I give you some privacy?"

"No. Please stay."

I actually want someone here. Even though the one I want to be here can't be I'd like as much company as possible, at least.

Then, once the scissor blades finally cut through the top of the envelope, I reach in and take out a single piece of paper.

The document prepared by the scheduling department has the details for what will be my first match as a professional Shogi player.

One piece of paper, so thin I can almost see through it.

My trembling hands flatten it out.

Ryuo League match.

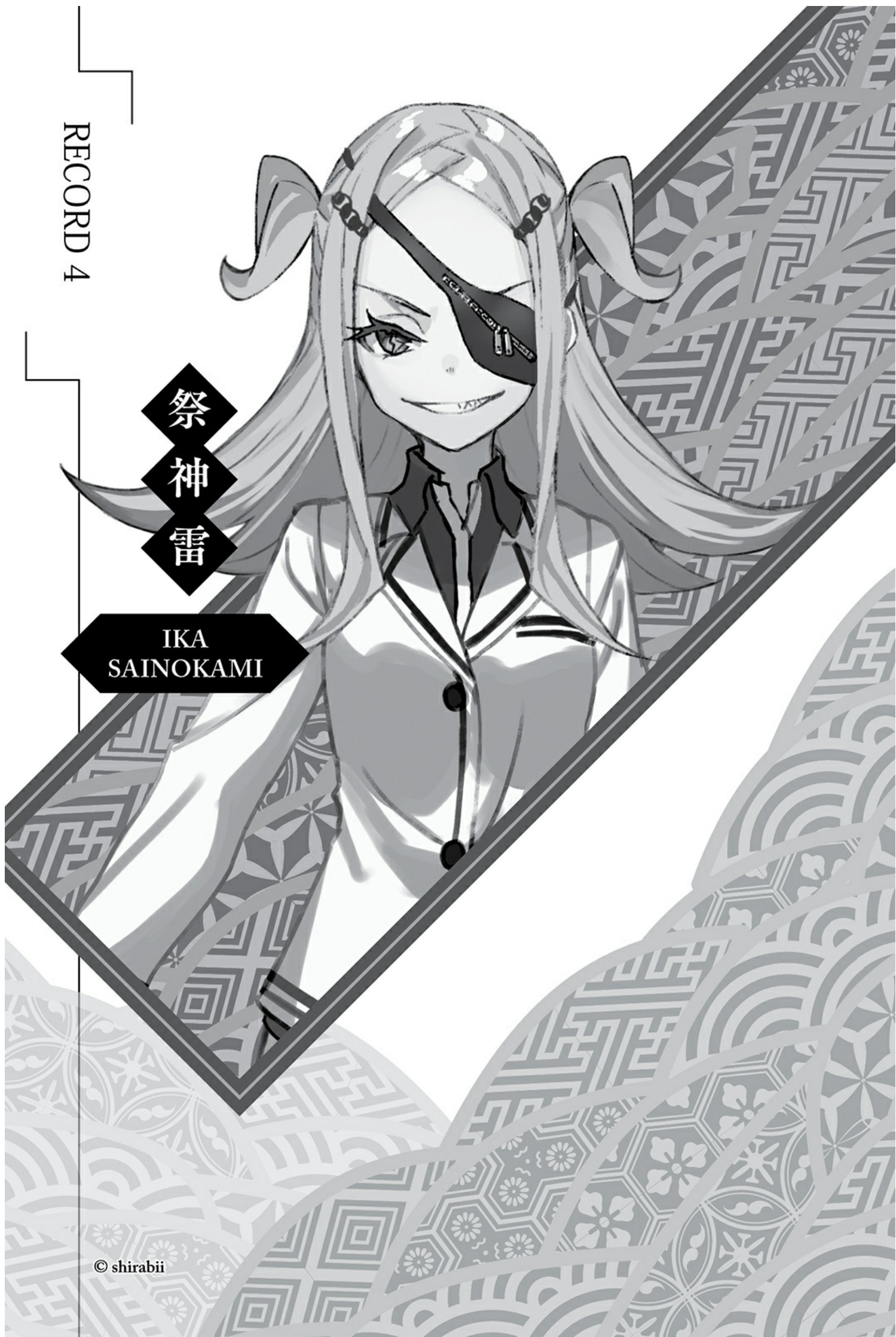
Location: the Tokyo Shogi Association building.

And, my opponent is——— Empress Ika Sainokami.

RECORD 4

祭
神
雷

IKA
SAINOKAMI



DEBUT

There have been rumblings above the clouds since the crack of dawn.

“To the Shogi Association in Sendagya, please.”

After walking out to the hospital’s taxi stand by myself, I climb into an ordinary cab and tell the driver where I want to go.

“The Shogi Association building, eh? Going there awfully early Huh?!”

One look at my face through the rearview mirror and the driver is suddenly wide awake.

Then he starts looking back and forth between the mirror and the radio.

“Today’s top story is what else but Naniwa’s Snow White’s professional debut! Sora 4—dan has been staying in Tokyo for several days in preparation for a Ryuo League match starting at 10 o’clock this morning——.”

I bet everyone on the radio, TV and even Internet news sites are going on and on about me right now.

Slowly, very slowly, the driver asks, “Um Would you like me to turn it off?”

“No. Keep it on.”

That way, it’s unlikely he’ll try to start a conversation.

I close my eyes and mentally prepare myself for today’s match.

The car quietly pulls out of the parking lot.

The driver not inputting the association’s address into his car navigator makes me a bit concerned, but I don’t say anything because there’s still plenty of time.

“Sora 4—dan is currently in a car heading southbound on Gaien-nishi Street and should arrive at the Shogi Association building within 10 minutes——.”

The driver looks up at the sky after coming to a stop at a traffic light.

“Ha-ha-ha. That’s impressive They’ve got an eye in the sky following this car

Those annoying rumblings were actually news helicopters tracking my location.

Months have passed since my promotion, so I thought things would’ve settled down a little bit by now. Though it looks like the extra time only pushed their interest past the boiling point.

—Just like Ms. Oga said would happen.

I’ve been avoiding people outside of work ever since the date of my debut was set.

That includes Keika, Yaichi, my parents and even Ms. Oga herself, who offered to drive me to the association today. I told her I wanted to go alone.

I will be fighting on my own as a professional.

I had to show everyone, including myself, that I’m ready for it.

“Sora 4—dan will be making her debut today against Empress Ika Sainokami, who has a full two years over her! Despite only being 18, she’s so strong that she has held that title for three consecutive seasons!”

Information about my opponent starts streaming out of the radio.

That’s Rokuroba Women’s 2-dan commentary.

“And these two have fought once before in the Mynavi Women’s Open Finals! Sora 4—dan was victorious, but she won by default because Ms. Sainokami broke the rules! Plenty of people theorize that Ms. Sainokami would’ve won had she just played normally. Some even go so far as to say that she is more talented than Sora 4—dan even though she lost.”

“But, Sora 4-dan is a professional now. A Women’s player should be no match

for her, yes?”

“Seems logical, doesn’t it? However, out of the entire Women’s League, Ms. Sainokami has the best record against professional players by far! Some might argue she hasn’t gone up against the best of the best, but——.”

Suddenly the car comes to a halt.

There are so many people crowding the street, we can’t get through after turning left at the Hatomori Shrine.

“Whoa?! What in the world?” the driver gasps without letting go of the wheel.

“Is that the car?”

“There she is!”

A throng of humanity descends on the taxi with smartphones held high, almost like the climax of a zombie movie. Next thing I know, we’re surrounded by rubberneckers who happen to be listening to the news.

“Wh-What would you like to do? I can’t exactly force my way through,” asks the slightly frightened driver.

I could call for help from the association.

But today I don’t want to. I’m doing things on my own today.

“I’ll walk the rest of the way. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“If you’re sure Um, if it’s alright with you, I’d happily accept your autograph in exchange for the fare.”

He holds out a permanent marker.

I have no idea what to say, but the driver continues. “I have a daughter in grade school. Seeing what you’ve done inspired her to play Shogi. Now I bring her to the association every Saturday and Sunday on my way to work, you see.”

“Oh So that’s why you knew how to get here.”

I take the pen from him.

“Would you be so kind as to sign the window? My daughter would be over the moon to know that Naniwa’s Snow White rode in daddy’s car.”

I have never written on vertical glass before, but my signature turns out cleaner and sharper than I anticipated.

My hands don’t waver, which means that I’m not all that nervous after all.

“Thank you! Good luck with your game Umm, they’re called matches, right? Anyway, I’m rooting for you!”

“Good luck with the rest of your workday as well.”

“Oh, I’m clocking out for today. I want my daughter to be the next one to sit in that seat.”

Something occurs to me as I go to open the door.

“What do you say to her when you drop her off in the morning?”

“Huh? Oh, ummm I’m not sure if I should say it to a professional Shogi player like yourself, but Go see how much you can lose.”

“I like that. She’ll get stronger in no time.”

Feeling grateful that I lucked into such a nice driver, I walk up the hill to the Shogi Association building as a professional for the first time.

... Along with enough rubberneckers to block traffic

Full ranks of cameras are pointed at me as soon as the building comes into view. Journalists and reporters who had been camping outside the association start talking into their microphones in a frenzy.

“It’s Naniwa’s Snow White!! Ginko Sora 4-*dan* has arrived!!”

“She seems to have grown out her hair!!”

“Perhaps she’s wishing for good luck?”

“I don’t know, but There’s one thing that’s for sure: that she’s becoming more beautiful every day!”

I walk up to the entrance and turn to face them.

Then I make a deep bow. It seemed like the professional thing to do.

“Go get ‘em!!”

“Don’t lose, Snow White!”

“I could die, I could die!! Naniwa’s Snow White is *right here*!!”

“Can I get your autograph?! Hey! Autograph!!”

All of them yell good wishes from behind their smartphone cameras.

But that nice driver’s words are the only ones I take with me as I finally step inside the association.

Ms. Oga is waiting for me in the lobby on the first floor.

“Good morning. Today’s match will take place in the fifth floor’s *Kouun* Arena.”

“Not on the fourth floor?”

“This decision was made for coverage reasons. As you surely noticed outside, there have been many requests from the press to take photos. Therefore your match has been moved to a more accommodating stage.”

The fifth floor is divided into several areas, including rooms for overnight stays, the broadcasting control room and studio, as well as the Women’s Player’s Room. However, very rarely do matches take place up there.

Using it for a *prestigious* match, like one from the Ryuo League, must be even more out of the ordinary.

“..... Is what one has told the press. The Empress’s bizarre antics are the true

concern. This match has been moved to the fifth floor to avoid disturbing the others taking place.” Ms. Oga whispers into my ear once we are alone on the elevator.

In other words, we’re being isolated.

I can understand how Sainokami’s behavior can be an issue. Her following Yaichi around comes to mind But rumors about her have died down in Kansai after Yaichi’s first pipsqueak knocked her off her high horse.

However, there is something bugging me.

After losing to the pipsqueak, her already sporadic Shogi has become downright unpredictable.

—Well it’s not that she has good and bad days. It’s more like her Shogi is broken

The elevator takes us up higher into the building.

“Room 501, directly beside the elevator, has been reserved for you,” says Ms. Oga. “You may eat there as well. However, the room next door is in use, so please be mindful.”

“I appreciate it.”

There’s a bed in there. I have never played a match with five hours of waiting time before. Women’s Title Matches only have three and staying in the arena from start to finish is still very draining for me. So it’s nice to know I have a place to rest. I doubt I can use the Women’s Player’s Room like I used to anymore

The elevator doors opened with a ding on the fifth floor and—.

“G-Good morning, Sora-sensei!!”

A tanned girl dressed in a school uniform standing at attention outside the elevator ambushes me with pure energy the second we make eye contact.

"I will be recording your match today, Noboryou 2-**dan**!! I just had to work your match as soon as I heard you'd be making your debut in Kanto! I must've called the secretary like five times a day for a week to get it! But what I really want to say is congratulations on your promotion to 4-**dan**!!"

"..... Thank you. Congratulations on yours as well, Ms. Noboryou."

"E-Epic feels!"

I know she's not a bad person, but sometimes I can't understand what she's talking about.

Ms. Oga mildly gestures for me to keep moving forward.

"The press will be granted access to the arena 15 minutes before the match is scheduled to commence. Please conclude your preparations before then Mobility will be quite limited once the press has arrived."

I nod and open the sliding door to the *Kouun* arena for the first time.

Ms. Oga stops me just as I'm about to go inside.

"Sora 4-**dan**, a scan for metallic devices must be conducted. One does not want to be rude but"

"Oh, checking for electronics. Here."

I had already turned off my phone. Giving it to her, Ms. Oga does a quick bow and waves a wand up and down my body.

Be-be-beep. It finds something.

The watch Yaichi gave me.

A heatwave suddenly pulses through me.

It's because a strange feeling creeps into my mind that the Shogi gods will be angry that I brought a gift from my boyfriend onto his sacred ground

"A watch is not a problem. Please go ahead."

So I step inside the arena.

A calligraphy scroll hanging in the alcove of *Kouun* reads Every day is a good day. Many accommodations have been made for journalists and reporters, including an overhead camera and the removal of the folding screens from the windows to make room for chairs. This room is surprisingly large.

I go to find the upper seat when suddenly——.

“Hurry it up, faker.”

A voice from deep in my memories shoots back to the surface.

“..... !!”

Ika Sainokami isn't here yet.

But her voice keeps ringing in my ears all the same. Just as it has since that day.

Fake.

That rabid beast lost because she broke a rule that no one thought would ever be broken: *putting a captured piece on the opponent's stand* But she still looked down on me like my victory wasn't real.

——But now that I can see without reading, after what I accomplished in the 3-*dan* division!!

Once I read her name on my match notice, I welcomed it.

Finally, a chance to get this voice out of my head.

——I have been reborn. I'm not an earthling anymore, but a Shogi Martian. Today's the day I prove it.

“Sora-sensei? Is there anything else I can do for you?” Ms. Noboryou says, pulling me back out of my thoughts.

“Um If I remember correctly, players get their own tea in Kanto, yes?”

“That’s true. There’s a big kettle and everyone pours their own cup. I could bring you your first one if you like?”

“In that case, I would like a tray with a cup and mug, please. With tea.”

“Coming right up!!”

Ms. Noboryou leaves the room with some pep in her step.

After watching her go, I put my bag into the closet and test out the floor cushion before sitting down on my ankles.

Lastly I remove the watch that never left my wrist and set it down on the *tatami* next to me. Closing my eyes, I hone my focus for the upcoming match.

Rolling thunder gradually echoes up from below. The building itself starts shaking as an army of reporters and journalists pour through the doors.

On the very same day that Ginko is making her debut in Tokyo.

I'm in Nagoya.

"..... Good morning. I'm looking forward to working with you today."

Arriving at the massive venue at Nagoya Port in Aichi Prefecture, and this place is overwhelmingly massive, I quietly sneak in through the staff entrance.

"Kuzuryu-*sensei* and one female guest are here!"

"Take them both to the waiting room, please!"

Hey, hey, hey, HEEEEY!!

"She's part of the broadcasting team! Not my guest!! We just happened to run into each other at the station on the way here!!"

Panicking, I try to clear my name, but the bombshell of a young woman behind me pulls my arm into her chest and says, "That I am. The two of us only partook in the same lodging."

"The same HOTEL that the ASSOCIATION assigned to us! Different rooms, of course! And besides, don't you talk like normal when you've got your hair up?! Quit breaking your own character!!"

"Oh, you're quite right."

I could've sworn a fox's patronizing grin appeared on Ms. Mato's face before she went into business mode.

"However, I am the only one covering this filler."

"Filler? Well, sure, Big Sis is extremely popular right now, but"

Every active Shogi writer is in Tokyo today.

Newspapers, magazines, the Internet, you name it. They have all gone to fill requests from all sorts of publishers.

And I'm absolutely certain that a Women's Title Holder like Machi Kugui would have received more offers than she could count to do live commentary on TV.

"Well, thank you for coming. I know I can count on you to do a good job."

"Why thank you, but that's not the only reason I'm here. The Tokai region, including Nagoya, is experiencing a Shogi boom of sorts, and I wanted to see it for myself."

"Huh? It's that popular here"

This is the semifinal of the tournament, the Tokai round.

After the first round in Osaka and picking up steam in the second up in Tohoku, I came to Nagoya last night to rest up before the third round today.

There's a children's tournament going on today as well, just like with the King of Naniwa Tournament.

Nagoyians are known for loving glamorous and lavish things, but setting up a venue this big makes me worried

Can they really fill up this much space?

But those fears get blown away as soon as I get to the main hall.

"Whoa?!! There are kids from wall to wall!!"

There have to be thousands of them in here.

From what I can tell, they're grade schoolers. Every single one of them is playing Shogi. Am I dreaming?

What's more——.

"..... Aren't there a lot of girls? Usually these tournaments are 90 percent boys, but it looks about 50-50 No, actually the girls outnumber the boys!"

“Impressive, Ryuo, that you have the ability to calculate the number of elementary school girls at a glance.”

Uh, no I don't.

“Nagoya is the only major city outside of Kanto and Kansai with its own Practice League. Since it makes the Women's League easily accessible for girls with aspirations to join, Shogi has held a high level of popularity in the area for some time.”

“Sure, I'd heard that there were a lot of girls in the Tokai Practice League, but this many?”

“What you see here is a recent phenomenon.”

“?! Then *this* is because of Big Sis?”

Ms. Mato smiles. That means I'm right.

“You see, there aren't enough Shogi players readily available to provide instruction in their Practice League, so I have been contacted to conduct seminars. I wanted to investigate before making any commitments.”

This exceeds even my expectations

Ms. Mato mutters under her breath, “Other cities like Fukuoka and Sapporo have decided to form their own Practice Leagues after seeing this level of success in Nagoya. Sendai is looking into the feasibility of a Practice League as well.”

“I-Is it okay for the association to branch out so fast?”

“Apparently sponsors have already been secured. A direct request from Sora 4-*dan* was all it took.”

“Big Sis was working on this stuff too?!”

“She made appearances on local TV programs to promote this tournament in Nagoya. The slogan of It's just a quick stopover seems to have worked

wonders.”

Taking a closer look, the girls have something twinkling in their hair It’s the same snowflake hairpin that I gave Ginko.

“They all want to become Ginko Sora.”

“.....”

“And they all want to shake a certain younger brother apprentice’s hand before leaving today, I presume.”

Her voice is kidding, but her eyes are dead serious behind her glasses.

One draw of tournaments like this is that the winner shakes hands with everyone who came to the venue at the end of the day.

“..... Looks like I can’t slack off.”

Yes, my Shogi is in a competing timeslot with Ginko’s today. I’m just filler.

At the same time though it feels like I’m fighting alongside her. That thought alone is enough to stoke the fire.

Intense heat coming from those girls playing Shogi crackles in the air as a staff member comes up to speak with me.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. What would you like for your lunch today?”

“Oh, um, do you have a menu?”

“Here. Please have a look.”

He gives me a laminated card with three options:

Deluxe Miso Pork Lunch Set (with red miso soup)

Miso Udon

Miso Pork Sandwich (with salad)

No matter what I choose It’s miso flavored

“Okay The sandwich, please.”

“Sure thing. Ah! I can have the mustard removed. What would you prefer?”

I’d prefer you remove the miso.

I’m gonna be really thirsty during today’s match For more reasons than one!

I get to the break room and find a bunch of pros and Women’s players gathered around the TV.

“Good mor- Huh? What’s everybody watching?”

“Sora 4-*dan*’s debut, what else?” says a listless young man standing by himself but with his eyes still glued to the screen.

Kanto Shogi pro Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan*.

I fought against him in a placement match last season and he also worked as the match recorder for the First Crown Title Match, so we’re on a see-and-greet basis. He also happens to be a student at the University of Tokyo who knows a ton about A.I. As a guy who never even went to high school, he is almost unapproachable.

“Futatsuzuka-*sensei*. How nice to see you again!”

“.....”

Ms. Mato says hello, but he just acknowledges her with a nod.

On a side note, Sora 4-*dan*’s debut match is being broadcast on networks throughout the country. This tournament only gets a live blog online

“Rumor has it that the networks forked over millions of dollars to get the broadcasting rights.”

“Women’s Throne matches are coming to Nagoya next month, too. Thank you so much.”

“She’s the new sliced bread.”

The Nagoyian pros chat among themselves in the local dialect with their eyes on the screen. They've pretty much put her up on a pedestal. Considering this part of the country has a declining birth rate and an aging population, Naniwa's Snow White really might look like a divine savior.

The lethargic Futatsuzuka-sensei keeps his distance from them as he glances back at the TV and mumbles, "Sainokami hasn't shown."

"Huh?!"

Ms. Mato and I spin around in surprise. And we both check the time in unison.

"I-It's already past 10 o'clock?!"

Ginko seemingly heard me yell through the TV because I hear her voice say, "*Ms. Noboryou. Let's go ahead and line up the pieces.*"

"Ah O-Oh, right!"

The match recorder joins her in setting up the board and even does the piece flip.

This is one way to deal with a player who is late for a match.

"..... *Five Promoted Pawns.*"

Working at high speed, each of the flipped Pawns lands upside down. Just as the words come out of the match recorder's mouth ...

...A strikingly bright voice echoes from the TV.

"*Sweet! The first move's aaall mine≡*"

So says a blonde high school girl holding two plastic bags from a local convenience store.

Plus she's crackling with laughter at the arena entrance.

“S—Sainokami! YOU-!!” the match recorder yells at the player who finally showed up while picking up the last piece off the *tatami* mat but stops herself. *“..... A-hem Sainokami-sensei It’s already 10 o’clock. Please hurry up.”*

“Yeah, yeah.”

Players are safe as long as they get to the board by 10 That being said, squeezing the tomato before a match that’s getting this much attention isn’t going to earn her any praise.

Ika plops down in the lower seat. Plastic bags crinkle as she starts taking things out one by one and setting them up next to the board.

A bag of chips.

Chapstick.

Eyedrops.

An ax.

A juice box.

A pastry. Wet tissues. A hand towel.

..... Hold up?

“An ax?!”

Even the match recorder couldn’t contain their surprise.

“S—Sainokami-sensei?! What is that?”

“My fan.”

No it’s not.

“That’s an ax, yeah?”

“An ax, yes.”

Futatsuzuka-sensei agrees with me right away. But he’s completely calm about it.

Ika has got an ax, for sure.

It's a small one that women can easily use, like a hatchet. It reminds me of the ones that bad guys in movies throw all over the place.

Of course, the journalists aren't staying quiet.

"Is that thing even allowed"?

"You'd think a metal detector would've flagged that"

"But it's not an electric device, so"

The whispers are growing louder by the moment. I don't blame them. This is all anyone has been talking about: Ginko Sora's pro debut match. The thing is that regular journalists and news people don't know the first thing about Shogi.

Enter an ax-wielding high school girl doing a Musashi Miyamoto impression by showing up late for a dual. Who wouldn't be entertained?

Ms. Mato makes a levelheaded observation.

"Since the association went out of their way to partition off this match on the fifth floor, Ms. Oga surely conducted an inspection. It has to be a toy."

Even if it is, that doesn't change the fact that she brought that thing into the arena for no reason whatsoever.

"Back in the day, players used to bring magazines or newspapers into the arena to read in the morning, but an ax is a first," remarks a flabbergasted older pro.

No one laughs. We can't laugh

Is she trying to break Ginko's focus with intimidation?

Or has she officially lost her mind?

Ginko, the closest person to that maniac right now, has kept her eyes closed ever since the piece flip so she wouldn't get thrown off her game. Impressive.

When she opened her eyes and saw Ika's face, however, she couldn't help but ask.

"What's with that?"

"Hrmm?"

Setting the ax down next to her cushion right where a fan would go, Ika hovered over it to make sure it was lined up exactly straight but snaked her head upward to answer.

*"Ahh. **This?**"*

Ika pats her face.

One of her eyes is covered with a patch.

TAX

It's been years since I've shared the board with this girl, and she's almost warped beyond recognition. I don't understand the point behind the ax or the eyepatch.

But there's one thing that hasn't changed.

"Hyeee!"

Her insistence on playing ridiculously fast.

Ika Sainokami uses the first move that the piece flip awarded her to open her Bishop Path. Rather than let the match recorder make the announcement or even do a proper greeting, she's already started...

... Like some wild animal. A carnivore, obviously.

"..... Good match to you too."

I say more to myself than anyone, take a deep breath and lower my head much closer to the board than usual to advance the Pawn in front of my Rook. Otherwise all the camera flashes would've hurt my eyes.

"At this time, all members of the media are to vacate the——."

Snap! Ika shifts her Rook all the way down the row before Ms. Oga can finish.

The formation she reveals in only her second move is——.

"Third File Rook!"

"Is it a good strategy?"

"Ranging Rook is weaker, right? Doesn't that mean Snow White has this in the bag?"

The clueless reporters dissect the match piece by piece as they take even more pictures.

Ms. Oga clears her throat to get their attention and declares in a hauntingly deep voice, “..... All members of the media are to vacate the arena, now.”

The message comes through loud and clear. Without any other choice, the reporters and journalists file out of the room.

A stark, empty arena.

I normally like this tranquility, but the moment the last of the crowd disappears a feeling of extreme vulnerability takes hold of me. This is the first

I’m sitting across the board from Ika Sainokami. Being thrown into a cage with a ferocious beast must feel quite similar.

Despite all the space in the arena, it’s suffocating.

—Ohh so this is what it’s like to be intimidated.

This sensation was seared into my mind when I was a little girl. So, akin to the lion raised by a dog that never disobeys its canine parent no matter how big it gets, I freeze on the spot.

—I have no choice but to win.

I channel my heart and soul into each move. Sainokami follows a completely ordinary Third File Rook sequence, which is in stark contrast to her behavior and appearance in the match thus far. It’s Normal Third File Rook, denying the Bishop Exchange.

Except her 15th move deviates from the standard.

“..... She raised the Silver?”

The left Silver is usually designated for defense, but she’s moving it into an aggressive position.

—This is the first fork, isn’t it?

Should I alter my formation to defend against her advance?

Or would it be better to advance now with a Rapid Attack and meet it head-on?

“The key to fending off Ranging Rook with a Rapid Attack isn’t by delivering one knockout punch, but instead building up points by delivering a series of body blows.”

The Worldly Maestro’s advice plays out in my head.

“So you have to be strong enough to take a hit as well. I think your playing style is a good fit already, but you’ve got to pair it with experience.”

Do I have enough experience?

I’ve been doing versus matches with Oishi-sensei for a long time now.

However when he played Third File Rook, he always fought with the left Silver parked at 6 Eight. It’s to prevent Static Rook strategies from attacking down the sixth file.

It looks like Ika Sainokami is planning to use it to attack instead.

—Advancing that Silver weakens defense But the Mino Castle formation is still formidable without it to defend the other side. This could be a problem

The offensive King is still in the center of the board.

But the right Silver has already moved up. A Mino Castle is almost ready.

—..... I’m not the same Ginko Sora anymore.

I can see how different pieces work in tandem without reading the board, just like Ika Sainokami and other Shogi Martians in the professional leagues. I can read faster because of it. My grade as a living being has improved. I can feel it.

— Even so There’s no guarantee I won’t make a mistake.

And I absolutely cannot lose this match. A professional player isn’t allowed to lose to a Women’s player.

So I need to rely on absolutes.

“Haaaa————..... NH!!”

Taking a deep breath, I step into the same world that I entered during my match against Sota Kunugi in the 3-*dan* division.

—— Calculate! Which route is faster?!

I commit large amounts of time and energy into the early game and read.

Will Sainokami’s attack hit first?

Or will I be able——to make an *anaguma* in time?

“Anaguma is my go-to formation when I need it.”

I put exactly what I said to Machi into practice.

There’s a way. That’s my conclusion.

Predictably, Sainokami plays without using waiting time. She’s advancing down the edge of the board as if to prevent me from reaching the corner, but I raise my Lance anyway to get my King there first.

——I made an *anaguma*! It worked!

The match is proceeding exactly as I calculated. Actually, I made it a few moves earlier than I anticipated That’s a good sign, right?

——She’s wasting a lot of turns. Does she think I’m a pushover?

Whatever the case, my formation is complete, and she’s stuck somewhere between offense and defense. Things just got a lot easier for me.

Right when I reach for my mug to take a drink of tea.

“..... You didn’t move up.”

“Huh?”

“Your fifth file Pawn stayed put,” Sainokami says with her eyes glued to the board.

So

“..... Omit the moves that can be omitted. That’s basic modern Shogi,” I answer from the safety of a fully formed Static Rook Anaguma without thinking.

I inadvertently answered her.

Being so focused on constructing an *anaguma*, I completely forgot an important lesson that I learned from reading so many storybooks with Yaichi way back when.

Fairy tales and legends all have something in common.

Once somebody answers the beast—that’s when tragedy starts.

“Ginkooo.”

The beast says my name, moistening her lips with that long tongue.

“You forgot to pay the tax.”

“Tax?”

“Thaaat’s right.”

Sainokami slithers her way into my face, putting both of her hands on the board to keep her balance as she whispers at point-blank range.

“You’ve received tons and tons, right, Ginkooo? That’s why you gotta pay the tax. Can’t be too greedy nooow? People get punished for trying to get out of it And end up paying soooooo much more than the tax. Soooo, soooo, soooo, SOOOOOOOOOO MUCH MOOOOOORE.”

Tax?

In Shogi terms, moves that are required in order to use a certain strategy are called tax.

In most cases, it’s talking about the edge Pawn. I haven’t touched it, but—.

“The tax for playing Static Rook Anaguma is that fifth file Pawn.”

Sainokami juts her finger at my stationary Pawn in the *middle of the board*.

“And the tax for the honor of being the first-ever woman in the pros on top of all my jealousy for the inexcusable sin of being Yaichi’s lover is getting branded the loser in your debut match against a Women’s Player, forever.”

“.....?! How did you——?!”

Just as those words slipped out of my mouth.

“..... So, *it is true*.”

That didn’t sound like the incoherent ramblings she’s been spouting up to this point.

Instead, it is more akin to a beast bellowing from the pits of hell.

“..... Ngh!!”

I clamp my mouth shut at the same time I seal my King in the *anaguma* with a Silver.

Once again Sainokami uses no time whatsoever to advance her own Silver forward. She didn’t even look at the rest of the board. Just my face.

I send my Rook forward to contain that snake of a Silver with horizontal pressure from long range!

This move is exactly why I left my fifth file Pawn in the starting position, so it wouldn’t get in the way.

——I read it perfectly!!

However.

Once she saw my Rook floating in open space, Sainokami—— immediately plays a move that no human being ever would.

“Ahaaa.”

Ika Sainokami’s right hand flips in a blur.

Moving her Knight to *1 Seven*.

I can't believe my eyes.

"The Knight came forward?! To the edge?! *The edge?!*"

I check over and over again to make sure my eyes aren't betraying me.

There's no mistake. She jumped her Knight forward but went to the edge of the board rather than inside. There's no mistake

That is normally considered to be a horrible move.

Not only does it limit the Knight to one space to advance to, but it also severely limits the player's options moving forward.

Wait! That Knight is vital for defending the King in a Mino Castle! It's irreplaceable!

"It's way too early to move that Knight Which would mean?"

There was no doubt in my mind that she was going for a Mino Castle.

That's why everything seemed so out of position for offense and defense. Therefore I thought I had read everything perfectly.

But——.

"Is she not going to protect her King? Will she fight like that?"

I haven't spent a single second reading into that possibility

That would mean that Sainokami was never going to make a Mino Castle or play Third File Rook from the start.

We were looking at the same Shogi board.

Looking at the very same formations, and yet.

——How did Ika Sainokami and I see it so differently?!

I'm stunned.

I-If I don't change gears now! But, I can't tell what picture Sainokami is

trying to paint on the board at all

“In that case!!”

I add a Gold into my *anaguma*’s defenses to make it even stronger. Rather than falling for any of my tricky opponent’s feints, I push forward what I originally had in mind.

My opponent doesn’t even have a Mino Castle.

Meanwhile, I have a fully formed *anaguma*. I might not be able to attack for a while But!

“I’ll turn the tables when a chance presents itself.”

“I won’t be letting you! Nope, noooooope!!”

Another instantaneous move. Sainokami advances her Knight yet again.

It’s making a beeline for my King the same way a spinning ax hurls through the air.

The ax that Ika Sainokami threw is whistling right for me!

“Feel the breeze yet? Do you?”

That toy ax she claimed was her fan. The beast is pointing it at me.

“.....!!”

A cold gust brushes across my skin and I reach up to touch my neck, unconsciously checking to make sure my head is still attached

—I knew she was armed, but I never thought it was a projectile!!

Willing my beating heart steady, I manage to get this hyperaggressive attack under control, but—.

“Ahaaa≡”

“?! Oh no!!”

Just when I thought I had blocked the frontal assault on my King, now her

Rook is in position to attack.

Worse, she has complete control over the center of the board.

To top it all off, all my opponent's attacking pieces have made a net around my King's hiding place!

"You shoulda paid up with that fifth file Pawn. Then shift your Silver over and that would've stopped everything in its tracks. Aren'cha sorry you were a penny pincher, now?"

Thanks to that explanation, I finally have a vague idea of the picture Sainokami has in mind.

"Heads fly the moment they think I won! just 'cuz they've got a Static Rook Anaguma. That's my Rapid Attack Third File Rook," says Sainokami, fully absorbed in her own little world as she lovingly strokes the ax. "I saw a guy throwing an ax just like this in a movie, then played Third File; watched that scene again, played Third File again; back to the scene, back to Third File, until that got to be a pain in the ass and just played Third File while watching that scene until I came up with this beautiful strategy."

What she just said is so far removed from my own Shogi sense that I can't relate to anything. I want to write it off as her hallucination and leave it at that.

However, I have no choice but to admit that this strategy is effective.

An ax that slices through the air like a Knight riding into battle followed up with a Bishop missile that strikes at the speed of sound. Ika Sainokami sums them both up in one word.

The name she dubbed her strategy——Tomahawk.

"..... Fitting."

Just like my King shut up in the *anaguma*, I have nowhere left to run. No matter how fearsome my opponent, no matter how fearsome her strategy, there's no choice but to face it and overcome it.

I take a Rook Exchange knowing full well I'm behind ... boldly, like true professionals do.

"By the way Ms. Sainokami."

Now it's my turn to ask the question.

"What tax did you pay to get stronger?"

"Meee?"

Her head pops up in surprise.

"This right here."

She flips up her eyepatch.

Beneath it——.

NOT HUMAN

After changing into my traditional Japanese clothes, I head to the break room to get rid of some prematch nerves.

Futatsuzuka-*sensei* is already here eating a boxed lunch. By himself.

“Ah Hello.”

I casually lower my head, and he does the same without saying a word.

Since the children’s tournament has reached the final round, all the coverage staff including Ms. Mato are on the stage doing their jobs.

Instructional matches, on the other hand, have finished up so Mr. Futatsuzuka is the only one on break.

“

I wasn’t expecting this, but still find an empty chair and sit down in silence.

It wouldn’t be so awkward if I had something to eat—that way there’d be a good reason not to start a conversation. Unfortunately I can’t since I’ve already changed And going right back out the door will just make things worse

I can’t take the silence anymore, so I pick up the remote and turn on the TV.

Once it clicks on—a full-blown incident shows up on the screen.

“Whoa?!”

The sheer bizarreness makes me jump out of my chair so quickly, it gets knocked to the floor.

A horror scene, with Ika lifting up her eyepatch!

*“See? After watching Shogi software go at it on alllll of my monitors eeeeeeevery, eeeeeeevery, everyeveryeveryeveryevery day for weeks and weeeeeeeeks, the sequences won’t go away anymore. I’ll break **the rules** again*

if I don't keep one eye hidden around the clock!!"

Ika reaches out for *Ginko's piece stand* and says, as her whole head rotates 120 degrees, *"Make – a – slip – up ☆."*

The camera zooms in on Ika's pupils.

One of them is twitching uncontrollably and looking off in a completely different direction.

All my electronics are currently confiscated by the staff, so I have no idea how the match itself has played out so far, but one look is all I need to know that Ika's attacks have been hitting their mark. There's no denying that, but

"Wh-What is she even talking about?" I absentmindedly mutter while staring at the screen.

Though I did get an answer from an unexpected place.

"So, even you feel that way, K-..... Mr. Kuzuryu."

"Huh?"

I looked over my shoulder in surprise.

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Futatsuzuka?"

"Exactly what I said. As far as I'm concerned, that animal who brought an ax to a Shogi match is the same species as you."

"..... Come again?"

M-Me and Ika? THE SAME?! Wow, this guy is rude

Or maybe the younger generation of Kanto pros still thinks that Ika and I are dating? I know that's what the rumors on the Internet are saying Well, that's better than them digging into my relationship with Ginko, so I've let those rumors and the ones about me having a Lolita complex be. It's on purpose, okay?!

"Mr. Kuzuryu. How do you use software?"

“How? Like normal, that’s how.”

“Like normal, you say. What’s your definition of normal?”

“Normal, just like all the pros use software: to analyze matches to find my bad moves, yeah? I almost never play matches against it. Sometimes I’ll start a match at a specific point, though Other than that, I have dissected the latest trends to see what the ratings are and experiment with sequences to find my own——.”

“There. That’s an anomaly.”

“Huh? Isn’t that how everyone does it?”

“Yes, indeed. Shogi players with no knowledge of programming will look at software sequences like that to find hints of some kind. Except *those hints don’t exist.*”

“B-But ...! Players use strategies developed by software in actual matches all the time and get great results!! There are so many examples, like how to defend against Ranging Rook——.”

“It is possible to derive special characteristics from the sum of individual data sets, yes. I’m not going to refute that. What I’m saying is that the sample size professional players have access to is far too small. A mere 1,000 matches available for study under one particular topic is insufficient to say it has been thoroughly analyzed.”

“.....”

“I’m undergoing university-level programming classes. Therefore I understand that 10,000 matches would be the absolute minimum sample necessary to identify trends. 10,000 matches with one topic in particular I assumed that you were merging the data to find concurrent characteristics as well. Because, even without programming knowledge, someone very close to yourself was using that method.”

Right away I understood what Mr. Futatsuzuka was getting at.

It's true that I have a connection to someone with fairly strong Shogi who studied programming at a particularly good university.

But I haven't talked about Shogi with them for nearly 10 years. Things happened, and that's just how our relationship worked out.

"From the perspective of programmers like me, there is little difference between you and what Sainokami is doing. Such primitive methods never yield results."

Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* isn't trying to pick a fight or anything, just going on and on about what he sees as facts.

"Many players have made comments like using software made me weaker and software and I don't mix well. Of course not. They aren't using it the right way to begin with. Those software programs weren't designed to be an educational tool in the first place."

"....."

That has seemed strange to me as well.

Modern Shogi software programs are made to defeat other software programs. The programs prior to themselves were originally made to beat human players.

They're designed to win, not to teach.

Think of it in terms of people. Pro players would put it this way: *Professionals don't become good instructors. This is because they don't remember how they became strong themselves.*

Software and pro players right now are one and the same.

I had a feeling that was the case, which was why I wasn't sure about taking an apprentice at all. That's why I set up an environment where they would grow on their own without me getting too involved.

Putting together the Grade School Practice Group, making sure Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin became rivals, that sort of thing.

If there was anything else that I committed my energy to doing, it was——.

“If a hypothesis can be made, it’s this.”

Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* breaks into my train of thought.

“Sainokami’s approach is a lot like deep-learning software in that she studied massive numbers of formations that occur within *matches* between software programs. It became the driving force behind her aesthetic sense of beauty

“Beauty?” I ask, pointing at the TV. “What’s beautiful about that mess?”

“Describing it as an aesthetic is the easiest way to understand. Sainokami doesn’t comprehend formations with logic. She makes her decisions based on what feels right rather than reasoning. She’s always displayed those tendencies.”

Feelings? Making decisions based on sight?

I open my mouth to object, but then something Machi said to me pops into my head.

“It’s said that only the current Meijin can see moves without reading. Do you believe such claims?”

When she asked me What did I say again?

“She just said so herself. That she saw so many matches the sequences have been *imprinted into her eyes*. She’s been watching software matches every waking moment.”

It sounds like science fiction, but the straight-laced Futatsuzuka-sensei is completely serious.

Then, with a lot of fire suddenly in his voice, “It’s gotten to the point, she recognizes advantageous situations with a glance, like an artist deciding what

color to add to their canvas. Therefore, Sainokami doesn't use waiting time. *She never reads.*"

"That's ridiculous. Of course she——."

"Look at the timer on the screen."

That is all he said, as if that was all that needed to be said.

 Ginko Sora: 3 hours 34 minutes expired

 Ika Sainokami: 0 hours 2 minutes expired

".....!"

I was trying to convince myself that her research lined up that well with the match played out.

But the board is so disorganized that it's impossible to reach this point using research. Actually, I'm not sure how to research a formation this bizarre.

C-Could it be true?

Is she? Is Ika really making decisions based only on what she sees?

"You, meanwhile, seem to have merged with the *sequences* software produces. Thought processes that shouldn't exist seem to take form as hallucinations within your mind, honing some kind of deviant sense For some reason, Yaichi Kuzuryu, you keep winning with figments that would normally be dismissed as delusions."

"....."

"If I were asked which is more dangerous, between Sainokami and yourself, I would happily cast my vote for the Demon King of the West."

..... I thought the reason I'd gotten stronger after incorporating software into

my research was just because I was a little better at using it than other players Or that maybe my sense of balance on the board was similar to how software worked.

But, just maybe ...

What if what Mr. Futatsuzuka is right and there is something special about me?

What if I'm seeing something different on the board than other players, like the Meijin and Ika do?

What if I'm seeing a completely different world from what Ai and Ginko see?

"Kuzuryu-*sensei*. It's time."

"Ah O-Oh, right! I'm on my way!!"

I jump to my feet once a staff member comes to get me. Tucking my shirt into my *hakama* trousers, I head to the stage.

Now is the time to ignore everything else and focus on my match.

—Even if we can't be side by side we can still fight together!

That's what it means to live as a Shogi player.

Even if we aren't seeing the same thing, that won't be a problem as long as we live the same way!

"If the lot of you truly are capable of doing that——."

Futatsuzuka-*sensei* quietly trudges through a sentence behind me.

"Whatever you are, it's not human."

HANSEL AND GRETEL

I observe the match alongside my prized apprentice.

“What is your opinion, God Cauldron?”

“I

Already a dashing young man, he has become far superior to myself.

Not just in terms of strength, either. He is now the ideal Shogi player in every sense of the word, the very picture of perfection in my eyes.

Consequently——.

“I believe the offense to be in an advantageous position.”

“Speak your mind, I insist. There is no need to walk on eggshells on my behalf.”

“.....”

Silence. Painful silence is all that comes from my apprentice.

For Ginko, along with the young Ryuo, was an integral part of his upbringing.

Even without her present, it seems my apprentice does not wish to voice criticism of her. What a truly kind child! However, that will become naivety over time.

“Speak.”

“At present, the offense is in victory position. Closing the gap at this stage would require nothing less than divine interference as the *anaguma* formation tends to depend on that.”

“Just as I myself reasoned.”

If my prized apprentice, who has received the alias Next Meijin, says as much,

then there isn't a shadow of doubt.

Though, in my old age, I cannot make enough sense of this mishmash formation to draw conclusions for myself

"Are you the same age as that fiend?"

"Negatory. The Empress is the same age as the Demon King: 18. I am two years their senior."

"..... What a surprise! To think you have already reached the age of 20."

My darling apprentice seems unsure how to respond.

"Though this sight is hard to accept so abruptly. Sora 4-*dan*, who emerged victorious from the rigors of the notoriously fierce 3-*dan* division, being tormented by such atrocious Shogi at the hands of a Women's player to this extent is"

"Sainokami is unique. She has always excelled in the four-hour waiting time format."

"The Empress League!!"

"Precisely. Sainokami has been invincible in matches that afford the most waiting time in Women's Shogi. She is, after all, the one who took the title of Empress from me."

To play against her is to live within a nightmare.

Continuously clashing talent against talent borders on humiliation, and I was powerless to stop it. Not to mention that her character and Shogi sense do not mesh.

Harkening back to that day even then I felt as though I wasn't playing Shogi across from a human being.

"B-But, Master! Both of Sora 4-*dan*'s current titles, Queen and Women's Throne, use a three-hour format! With that amount of experience under her

belt, a mere extra hour would not——.”

“Ginko should have lost that match in the finals. The true Queen is not her.”

That one move unraveled the threads of destiny.

“But the adversary sitting across from her this very moment ...”

Ika Sainokami is a prodigy, too much so.

—— Meanwhile, the Ginko I first shared the board with *was exactly the girl Kousuke said she was.*

Frail.

Nary an inkling of Shogi talent.

Hates losing with a passion, clingy and endlessly doted on by her Master to the point that she never doubts others, she had maladroit characteristics, which prevented her from building social relationships by any other means than Shogi. As it was her only outlet, she was unable to let it go Yet her appearance made her stand out in a crowd.

Deceiving such a miserable girl was easier than twisting a baby’s arm.

——As I had already done so tens of times before: Approached young girls who showed promise and rewarded them with treats once they entered my castle. Whispered sweet nothings into their ears: “You are special, unique” and the like with a beaming smile and sent them barreling into hell.

Ginko was nothing more than another casualty. It was not her talent, but her unyielding willingness to put forth effort that drew my attention.

——I melded that brittle gem into my vision of the perfect Shogi player, the Naniwa’s Snow White whom everyone adores.

And thus Ginko became the first-ever female professional player.

Her Herculean efforts pushed her own talent and body beyond their original

limits.

However, if a female professional capable of claiming a title from the men were to appear, that woman would be——.

“Master. A phone call.”

I pick up the receiver of the phone my apprentice holds out in front of me and hear another devil speaking on the other end.

“There is something to discuss.”

“What a coincidence. I was planning to pay you a visit myself.”

Our conversation brief, I hang up the phone.

A decision far more painful than defeat is on the horizon Surely, she and the Ryuo will despise me for this.

“..... I am surely destined for hell myself.”

“I shall accompany you, no matter the destination,” my beloved apprentice responds instantaneously while extending a hand to support his Master.

I smile despite shuddering from the depths of my own actions.

——Because of me, this one and even his younger sister

I deserve to be plunged into hell. On my own, of course.

PROFESSIONAL

I started leaving my cushion more frequently after I had used about two hours of waiting time.

“Paaant Paaant Haaaaaa——.....”

Past the three-hour mark, simply sitting next to the board made me feel like I was going to faint.

I go lie down on the bed in the room that was set aside for me and try to catch my breath.

“Hffff——.....”

Matches in the 3-*dan* division only had an hour and a half of waiting time. Back then, it felt like it was gone in an instant. What I would have given to have twice or three times as much

“..... Thinking I could rest if only there were more waiting time I was so naïve”

Staring at the board makes my vision cloudy, and all the adrenaline in my system is making lactic acid build up in my muscles. This level of listlessness is beyond painful.

When I worked as a match recorder during my time in the Sub League, I often silently ridiculed veteran players grunting and groaning in pain as they used enormous amounts of waiting time all at once.

I can't count how many times fatigue got the best of one of them late at night and they played a move so bad that the whole match fell apart. Seeing it happen made me sad.

——Why are they so weak?

The Shogi would be so much better if those players would be forced into

retirement and 3-*dan* was made the new entry level for professionals Now I realize those were just the clueless ramblings of a cheeky little girl.

“Haha. This is karma, I suppose? I’m sorry, Master

Stepping away from the board doesn’t help. Neither does thinking about other things.

My brain won’t stop working. Generating heat non-stop all the while

“..... Here I thought that eyepatch was just for flair

My unpreparedness is now painfully obvious. Sainokami sees more than I do, so that eyepatch must serve to lessen the strain on her mind. On the other hand, I never once thought about trying to limit my abilities now that I’ve become a Shogi Martian

It’s undeniable. I’m being outdone in the professional battlegrounds of waiting time, preparation and determination.

“..... Too hot

I press a cold water bottle against my eyelids and try to visualize the board from my opponent’s perspective. It’s more difficult to do so with the actual board in front of me, so I’ve been stepping away to use my mental Shogi board instead.

Most likely, I’m at a disadvantage right now.

The problem is even with her point of view, I can’t see how the moves will play out.

Nothing is coming to mind, like a modern artist being told to create a traditional *ukiyo*e painting.

“What what in the world is she trying to make?”

Even with the brush in my hand, I have no idea what colors to use or even what to paint. I’m drawing a complete blank.

“..... So, this is talent”

While I was able to avoid taking damage from that Knight charging up the edge, that whole sequence was nothing more than a bluff.

However, this isn't art. It's a competition.

The superior player will become clear with each passing move. Anyone can understand results as cut and dried as victory and defeat. So long as I can't determine the correct strategy, I should stick with my original plan.

My current formation is the *anaguma*, considered to be the best practical formation in existence.

“I'll stay the course and crush her attack. Boldly, like professionals do.”

My mind made up, I decide to drink some of the now lukewarm water and wrap my fingers around the lid.

But—.

“Nh?! Nghhh?!! It can't be”?

The lid won't budge no matter how I try.

There's no strength left in my right hand

“Ha-ha Just how weak am I”?

There's no point in trying anymore, so I leave the bottle of water in the room as I adjust my clothes on the way out the door to go back into the cage where the beast is waiting for me.

“Oh, there you aaare≡”

Sainokami greets me while sprawled out on the *tatami* mats, using her cushion as a pillow and snacking on potato chips.

“Why won't you make any moves, Ginko? I'm out of snacks already. C'mon,

I'm sooo boooored! Boredboredboredboredbored!"

Her running that abnormally long tongue up and down her salty fingers must mean she already knows what she's going to play next.

Of course, the TV camera has captured every moment and Noboryou 2-*dan* is glaring at her from her seat at the boardside table, but Sainokami doesn't seem to care.

Once I sit back down, I look over at Ms. Noboryou and ask, "May I see the match record?"

"Yes. Here you are."

"One more thing I apologize, but would you go buy a bottle of water for me?"

"Huh?"

She tilts her head, confused.

But a smile appears on her face right away.

"Yes, of course. No problem."

Once I see her nod, I take the coins I had prepared out of my pocket and reach over to give them to her.

"Ah."

—Oh no! My hand trembled

Ms. Noboryou scrambles to pick the coins up off the mats.

"Pardon me, Sensei! I'll get them!"

She picks up the last one and almost tumbles her way out the door.

"....."

While I do feel sorry for her, now isn't the time. I return my focus to the board.

I'm in for a defensive sequence. That much is clear.

— Either take the incoming Lance in front of my King with a 1 Four Pawn
or bring my Bishop back to 3 Three to strengthen my defense

Reading through those options.

"There's somethin' I don't get about the *3-dan division*," says Sainokami from her spot on the floor. "Why do they play so damn slow?"

Suddenly Shogi is the last thing on my mind.

"I thought that, you know, maybe I should try out the Sub League myself, but now I'm glad I didn't. The Shogi in there, it's just so depressing A total snooze fest. Tons more interesting stuff shows up on my laptop, so I don't care anymore."

"....."

"They say they're training, I guess? But all it is is just takin' match records for who knows who for years and years. If you've got that kind of time on your hands, play Shogi yourself, know what I mean? And it's not like I'd want to play against just anyone if I were a pro anyway. At the end of the day, all I want is some play time with Yaiii—."

"Sainokami."

"Yea?"

"Shut up."

Snnnn—AAAAAAAAP!!

Sacred echoes of a Shogi piece purify the polluted arena air.

Playing a move while the match recorder is away from her seat is extremely rude and will also put her in a tough position, but I've had enough of listening to the beast's abusive ramblings. Most of all, I wanted to spare Ms. Noboryou from hearing them while she is still in training.

So I made a move.

A move that sparks my interest far more than her incessant banter.

That move—deploying a Rook deep in her territory in position to take either a Bishop or a Knight. The ultimate counterattack!!

Forget defense, I'm going for all-out aggression.

“Hyeee!!”

Sainokami pops up.

“Now, that's more like it, Ginko! That's what I'm talking abooout!!”

Like a carnivore spotting prey, Sainokami snares a piece off her stand with those gaudy fake nails.

“You're strong now, riiight?! You're a pro, RIIIGHT?! The first girl to make it through 3-*dan* division hell, RIIIGHT?! Then show me something goooood!!”

Then, right behind where I deployed my Rook ... Sainokami takes aim right for it by deploying her own Rook!

“?! Careless!”

She's using it to fend off my Rook. That's how it looks to me.

“Soft!!”

I slide my Rook one space and flip it over.

A Promoted Rook, the Dragon King.

Just having one doesn't automatically tilt the board in my favor.

—But! But!!

The mere sight of it turns the twinges of pain throughout my body into a comfortable, roaring fire.

My cloudy vision becomes crystal clear.

“Here I cooome!” she declares for some reason I don’t understand and, completely ignoring my newly promoted Dragon, launches into an aggressive push.

However it lacks teeth because she used her Rook on defense already.

Her early game formations went beyond human comprehension.

However!

—Her late game isn’t as precise as it used to be?!

“Tccccch! Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeekin’ *anaguma!!*” Sainokami fumes as her attack fizzles out. She then attacks my Dragon instead.

However, I use the leeway she gave me by attacking my King first to take her Knight and reinforce my piece stand. She responds by sliding the Rook she deployed all the way across the board into my territory. So, looks like we’ve traded an eye for an eye, but—.

“Hyeehe! I’ve got a Dragon toooo!!”

Now each of us has the strongest piece in Shogi under our command.

The Dragon King.

This match has become a competition to see who is most worthy of using that piece.

Who is most worthy of riding to victory with it. Who will earn the right to fight *him*.

“Have another!”

Now that she has a Dragon, Sainokami slides her Bishop into position to attack my *anaguma* once again.

My Gold and Silver armor gets chipped away until my defense is completely gone.

Except, strange as it seems, this attack doesn't frighten me. My King may be all by its lonesome in the corner of the board, but it is very much alive.

—Sota or Mr. Kagamizu would have attacked much more efficiently.

I'm absolutely certain that Ika Sainokami's late game abilities have deteriorated.

Or, perhaps—.

"I've gotten stronger?"

"..... Grrr!"

Sainokami bites her ax in frustration.

This reminds me of the match that Yaichi's apprentice—Ai Hinatsuru—played against this beast in the Mynavi Women's Open.

Sainokami built an overwhelming lead using Direct Opposing Rook, but failed to defend properly once the pipsqueak was pushed to the breaking point during one-minute Shogi... and lost.

So.

"..... Here"

I commit every remaining second of waiting time I have—to landing on the planet that Shogi Martians call home.

With a firm grasp on the final key, Shogi puzzles.

"..... Here Here Here"

—One second is all I ask! One move, just one move!!

I'm more than ready to make the journey into that world But excessive heat and thirst muddy my thoughts to the point that I can't connect with the pieces like I did before!

"Sora-sensei. You have five minutes remaining."

“?! Ah U-Understood!”

I glance to the side.

Ms. Noboryou is back and placed a bottle of water on my tray.

“ ”

.....

Memories of the water bottle lid I couldn't open flash through my mind for one scary moment as my hand hovers over my lap.

But those fears prove to be misplaced.

The water bottle she bought for me is already open.

“Sora-sensei, one-minute Shogi begins now.”

“Okay!!”

I say a silent thank you to her in my mind even as the Sub League member feigns ignorance while counting down.

—Thank you. I swear I will win.

And I'll shove every slanderous word Sainokami uttered about the Sub League back into her face.

“Nh! Ngh! Fhha!! Whew——.....”

I down half the water in three gulps straight from the bottle and use the minute I have left to rocket myself onto Planet Shogi.

"Here, here, here
Herehereherehereherehereherehereherehere,
HEEEEEEEEERRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!"

I get my answer. The same move that pipsqueak would play.

—Use the full width of the board! In other words The Bishop!!

The back corner of enemy territory.

I deploy a Bishop as far away from my King as physically possible!

“Here!!”

“..... Agh?”

Unable to comprehend my intention, Sainokami ignores my Bishop and commences her third attack. I knew her late game had holes.

“Come.”

I shift my Bishop one space back to promote it to a Horse and say the perfect line for this very moment.

“I’ll dance for you.”

Not caring, Sainokami deploys a Silver to press her attack while I deploy a Silver of my own to support my Horse.

Deploy a Silver, deploy a Silver, deploy another Silver, take it with a Silver—a Silver waltz.

“Repetition Draw!!”

Sainokami and I yell simultaneously. However, the timbre of my voice is the complete opposite of hers.

Should it happen, I will gain the advantageous first move for the rematch.

And, most importantly—a chance to redeem my debut after her ambush made it a complete mess!

“Aww, aww, awwwww. NO, NO, GIIIIIIINNNNNNNKKKKKKOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Sainokami changes course so abruptly that she withers in pain.

She deploys a Pawn directly in front of my King to create the check path, but—.

“Too late.”

That move doesn’t put me in check, thus her offensive has officially come to an end.

—It will get there.

The match that the Shogi gods showed me in a dream on my birthday starts to unfold before my eyes.

A spacious *tatami* room at a luxurious inn somewhere.

Dressed in ornate kimonos, Yaichi and I play Shogi with no one to bother us.

Our kimono patterns are identical to the one that Master wore during his title match on TV. Yaichi and I had huddled under the same blanket and drawn ourselves wearing it after we saw him—.

“Let’s wear kimonos, too! Let’s swear we will!”

Both of us have worn kimonos for matches many times since that day.

—But, not like we did in that dream

Determined to make it come true, I reach out to my piece stand to unleash the move that will turn the tables once and for all!

“30 seconds———.”

Huh?



..... Ms. Noboryou? Why are you counting?

“40 seconds———.”

I already played my move, so why?

So, I check the board and then my piece stand.

The piece I picked up is still there.

“Ah.”

I can't grip anymore.

Searing pain then tears through my body from head to toe. It hurts, it hurts!!

It takes every ounce of my willpower to keep from screaming.

At the very end of my five hours of waiting time, in the final moments of the final minute, my body betrays me.

——Am I supposed to keep playing like this? One-minute Shogi?

Absolutely impossible.

But I'll run out of time if I don't do something now. A humiliating loss is 15 seconds away, the type of loss a professional is not allowed to suffer.

——Anything but that Anything but that!!

Victory in my debut.

The dream that *he* and I drew together.

All of it slipped through my fingers with that one last piece.

“50 seconds——— one, two, three, four, f———.”

“Take with!!”

During the countdown, saying a move out loud is accepted.

“Six, seven, eight, n———”

“Knight.”

So.

I make my choice at the last moment.

For an elegant death to remain on the match record—as a professional would.

My monstrous opponent reaches for the board at the speed of light in less than a heartbeat.

Worldly Thunder—Ika Sainokami.

First a flash.

Then lightning strikes.

An ax called talent hits me directly between the eyes.

“Oh yea. I haven’t given you a promotion present yet, have I?”

Her uncovered eye stares me down.

“Congrats, Ginny-ko.”

With that, she deploys a Silver directly beside my King.



It's *hisshi*.

Meaning, my King is dead no matter what I do.

—Would the pipsqueak have found a better way?

I can extend the match by continuously putting Sainokami in check.

If I were still in elementary school still an amateur, I most definitely would have fought until the last move without losing hope. That's what the me who drew herself in a kimono with all those innocent hopes and dreams back then would have done

However, I'm not an amateur or an elementary school student.

Worse I don't even have the strength to hold a piece anymore

So I fulfil my final duty as a professional.

"I lost."

Ginko Sora 4-*dan* surrenders on the 103th move.

Expired waiting time—

Ginko Sora: 4 hours 59 minutes

Ika Sainokami: 8 minutes

DECISION

Reporters come into the arena immediately afterward.

Since I had my back against the wall since early in the match, they were most likely waiting outside the arena. Round after round of humanity avalanches toward me with their microphones at the ready.

“Sora 4-*dan*! What went wrong?!”

“Why did the invincible Naniwa’s Snow White lose to a Women’s League player?!”

“Were you overconfident?!”

Proper protocol dictates that all questions from the media are directed to the victor first. Ms. Oga surely explained the process to them in great detail already.

However, they trample the rules underfoot and come straight to me, the defeated, instead.

I expected as much.

That’s why I have been collecting my thoughts since the beginning of the late game. I’m ready to field their questions without delay.

“I lost because I was weak. I had never seen that formation before and was unable to adapt in time.”

A reporter representing the newspaper sponsoring the match proceeds to the next logical question.

“..... With this loss in your debut, you have lost the ability to advance in the Ryuo League this season. A duel with your sibling apprentice will have to be put on hold for the time being What are your thoughts?”

“Kuzuryu-*sensei* and I are in very different positions. He has two professional

after a match against a Women's League player.

This is what it means to lose.

A review session didn't happen. There was nothing to say.

I immediately go back to the room that Ms. Oga reserved for me because all I want right now is to be alone. I'd give anything to collapse into that bed that served as my sanctuary so many times during the match.

But when I turn on the lights of my supposedly empty room the last person I expected to see is here.

"Keika?! Why are you——?!"

"Why am I here? Because I was next door the whole time. You insisted on doing everything yourself, so I had to go behind your back to make sure I was around in case something happened," said Keika from the bed, speaking slowly like a parent lecturing their child. "This isn't the first time, I'll have you know. The chairman always had a room reserved whenever you had a Sub League match. Akashi-sensei was always on call somewhere close by, and Father found excuses to be in the area as well, Ginko."

"..... I knew that already."

Chuni, the Sub League's secretary, told me about Master.

"And? If you were here the whole time, why did you show yourself now? To console me after a loss?"

"You know the answer to that too, don't you?"

"..... So what if I lost to a Women's League player in my debut? I know better than anyone that my perfect record against them was all luck. At least now that I've lost, I won't have to work so much. So if I focus that extra time on research——."

“That won’t make any difference,” she answers instantaneously. “You won’t stand a chance in the Placement League the way you are now, Ginko. I can see it already: not only will you lose them all, you’ll have to drop out and end up forfeiting matches.”

“There’s no way to know until I try——.”

“Oh, but I do know. You’re in terrible shape after a five-hour format Ryuo League match against an opponent who only used eight minutes. Trying to do a placement match with six hours of waiting time will literally kill you.”

“The only reason my opponent won is because she was better prepared. If I devote more time to researching, I won’t lose.”

“That won’t work. Because, seriously——.”

“Ginko, you haven’t played a full match of Shogi in over four months, have you?”

Keika has the water bottle I gave up on opening in her hand.

“.....”

She piles on even more as I stare at my feet in silence.

“Since when? You weren’t in any shape to play during the last weeks of the 3-*dan* division, were you? I heard all you did at home was sleep.”

“.....”

“Please, tell me, Ginko. How long has it been?”

“..... Playing Shogi has been painful every now and then ever since I was little

Yes. That fact has followed me around like my own personal rain cloud.

At some point that pain just became the way things were.

“I get feverish, fatigued and dizzy But I always thought that was because my heart hadn’t healed”

“Your heart is completely normal now. Dr. Akashi gave you his word, remember? The hospital in Tokyo did thorough tests as well and found nothing wrong. There’s no doubt it’s fully recovered.”

Keika makes direct eye contact with me as she speaks.

Those aren’t the eyes of a liar

“I spoke with your mother, actually. It took some fast talking to get Ms. Oga and Chairman Tsukimitsu to reveal that something else was wrong besides your heart. How could I have been so blind? I should’ve noticed first since I was the closest one to you all this time!”

You wouldn’t, Keika.

Because I’ve been desperately hiding it from everyone.

“Big brother Seiichi regrets letting you go on with this. He said that he should’ve insisted you take a leave of absence as soon as you were promoted to 4-*dan*. But, being a professional player himself, he knew that someone else deciding what you can and can’t do would only make you upset. So he at least wanted to let you make your debut before——.”

“I’ll play. I’ll keep playing. I am a professional player now, aren’t I?!!”

I nearly scream at her, but Keika simply stands up and embraces me.

Just like she used to do when I pouted as a child.

“Ginko There’s no rush. You’ll get better as long as you take the time to rest up properly. This will go away on its own, just like how your heart got better——.”

“..... No, it won’t”

I clutch my chest and yell.

“This hasn’t healed at all! I’m just as frail as ever Why didn’t you tell me I’d never get better?!”

“I see You found out *about that*, didn’t you?”

I wouldn’t have if I never stayed at the hospital in Tokyo.

Chairman Tsukimitsu recommended that I undergo a thorough physical exam, not just get treatment for my ribs, while I had the time. He said it was for my own future as a professional player.

I had only ever been examined by Dr. Akashi in Osaka, so it was the first time I’d heard what a different doctor had to say about my health.

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Dr. Akashi. But I never felt any better despite his insistence that I had made a full recovery. I was getting anxious. If I couldn’t find the problem that was keeping me from playing Shogi

Long story short, the problem wasn’t my heart.

Dr. Akashi didn’t lie to me.

But he didn’t tell me everything. Especially not the harsh reality.

“Why, Keika?! Why didn’t anyone tell me?! Master said all those things because he knew, right?! If I had known, I’d——.”

“Would knowing have stopped your feelings, too?”

“.....”

Would it have changed how I feel?

No, of course not That’s impossible

“..... He finally

The emotions I kept at bay in the arena hit all at once and tears start flowing.

All the pain, the misery and heart-rending affection tear me apart from the

inside I wail through a river of tears.

“He had finally said that he loves me

Everything that was within my grasp slips right through my fingers along with these tears.

“He ... he’s an idiot Already talking about getting married, things like that I mean, seriously? I only just turned 16 and he

“Ginko

“He said he wants to have our own family tournaments So he wants an even number of kids Ha-ha Stupid, right? He doesn’t know anything Ha-ha-ha-ha

What would he say if he found out?

That he still wants to marry me, probably. He is an idiot, after all Throwing away that happy future that he keeps dreaming about

“But I’m an idiot, too. All because he said he can’t wait to see me grow my hair out for the wedding ceremony I went and grew out my hair anyway——.”

“Ginko!!”

Keika cuts me off.

“That’s enough, Ginko. You don’t have to say another word.”

Something warm rolls down the back of my neck.

Keika is crying while holding me tight in her arms.

“If you want to be Yaichi’s wife, I won’t stop you. You can ignore everything that Master said and do what the two of you want to do. If you want to stay on this track, go ahead and see how far it goes. I think that’s just fine. In fact, I think that that’ll work out the best. Not just for the two of you But for me, and the others as well

“Kei- ka”

Research might let me win short Shogi matches.

It might even net me a few victory stars in the professional Shogi world.

But I won't last long if I can't win any placement matches.

Six-hour Shogi is in a different realm from any match I have ever played. Even if I make it through the early stages, everything will fall apart in the mid game. Thinking about it rationally, it's obvious that I can't win when simply sitting next to the board is so difficult.

Keep losing for three years and I'll be demoted to freelance. Either that or retire. All without taking one step forward from the starting line.

“But if you want a different future for yourself,” whispers Keika. “If you still want to keep your eyes on the summit, choice is a luxury you don't have. Master, Chairman Tsukimitsu and the Women's League Chairman Shakando-*sensei* all acknowledge that it's up to you. The decision is yours, Ginko.”

I close my eyes.

Visions of everyone celebrating Yaichi and me at our wedding and wishing us well play out in my mind. I can see myself doing the housework during his title matches while playing my own from time to time. To lose.

Just as Keika said, I might be happiest that way.

But.

“..... How did *his* match go today?”

“He won.”

“Oh”

Even after hearing it, I don't feel happy for him.

Only pressure and jealousy.

More than losing to Ika Sainokami Hearing that he won while I lost lights a new flame within my battered and bruised fighting spirit.

Everything is clear now.

What I really want to do is——.

“I understand.”

I take Keika’s advice to heart.

I stay up until morning that night, writing messages to explain my decision in my own words.

The first message is meant for the world as a professional player.

The other is meant for one person in particular.

However, the day arrived before I sent one of them.

RECORD 5

夜
叉
神
天
衣

AI
YASHAJIN



REGISTRY

Today is supposed to be clear and sunny, which it hasn't been for a while.

"Hmhmhm♪ Dodo doooo♪"

The weather's surprisingly balmy, considering it's November.

My practice session yesterday went really well.

I'm winning my way to the tournament and played fulfilling Shogi in the First Ryuo Title Match.

Everything is going my way, and I have a lot of energy despite being right in the middle of a title match series.

But what really has me walking on air is Charlette telling me she wants to join the Practice League and asking to be my apprentice over the phone.

Our conversation got recorded, so I listen to it again and reflect on those wonderful moments.

"Cha, Cha wants Masta to be Cha's Masta."

"I see But you realize that our bond will last forever if we become Master and apprentice, don't you? Couples can break up, married or not, but the Master-apprentice relationship will never end Can you swear your everlasting love to me?"

"Oui! Cha lubs Masta foreba!!"

Apparently she was going to wait until after the Ryuo Title Match to make the call, but it's so adorable how she just had to ask when I became a Dual Title Holder! Too cute!

The next Practice League Entrance Exam isn't until next year, so I told her to study up hard right now so she can pass.

“He-he-he. I’ll buy her a ring to celebrate when she does≡”

On a side note, hardly anyone ever fails the Entrance Exam, so Charlette and my (Master and apprentice) love is as good as set in stone. Yesss!

“She’d always said she wants to be my bwide, so I’m kind of sad that she chose Shogi over me, but It just means she’s growing up, too”

Exactly. Besides, when it comes to brides, mine is

“She should have calmed down by now, right? I’ll call and see”

I also lost to an opponent I thought was below me, Mr. Natagiri, in my own debut. All the pain and humiliation drove me to run 60 kilometers to Chigasaki and dive into the ocean. I wasn’t trying to kill myself, just to be clear. I was actually planning to swim all the way back to Osaka. I wasn’t in my right mind.

“..... Losing your debut hurts so bad that stupid ideas like that seriously sound plausible”

What’s worse is that you’re in no shape to listen to what others have to say. Anyone living in this world would want some space after a loss.

But being alone gets lonely.

After all, it takes two people to play Shogi.

“I think it was about a week after the match when Ginko came to find me. Now I have to return the favor and help her get back on her feet.”

I’ll join her for some practice matches and be her punching bag.

She obviously wouldn’t want to talk on the day of, but she’ll calm down with enough time. The problem is when to approach her.

Ginko has a ton of pride. She used to beat the crap out of me just for worrying about her when we were kids An unexpected phone call or dropping in to visit her unannounced might blow up in my face.

“Which means the standard in this case would be to send a message and see

how she responds.”

It’d be a good idea to send her a message now while I’ve got some time.

I take out my smartphone and—.

“..... What the?”

Ginko’s number isn’t in my contacts. It should be right here.

But it’s gone. Getting a really bad feeling about this, I dial Ginko’s number by hand but all that comes out of the speaker is an emotionless voice saying, “*The number you have dialed is currently not in service.*”

My heart is racing now. Cold sweat rolls down my back.

Just when I’m about to check my contacts one last time, a breaking news alert pops up on my phone.

“Ginko Sora 4-*dan* announces leave of absence. Length not specified. Taking leave immediately following a debut match is unprecedented.”

..... Come again?

Leave of absence?

“That has to be a joke, right? I mean, taking leave without telling me first?”

C’mon, Ginko. I know losing your debut match hurts, but isn’t erasing your accounts and taking a leave of absence out of nowhere a bit too much?

I tap on the link to the article and try to read it, but my fingertips are so sweaty the phone doesn’t respond at all.

“Health reasons are cited for the leave of absence. The Shogi Association chairman will be conducting a press conference in the near future to provide

further details.”

Yeah, this is just plain off. Somebody has to be pulling a prank, right? Spreading fake news like this.

Because, seriously, I haven’t heard anything from Keika, Master, Chairman Tsukimitsu or Ms. Oga about it.

Knock. Knock.

Somebody is knocking at the door to my room. Sliding it open——.

Ai Hinatsuru is standing there.

“Master. I need to talk to you.”

One look at my apprentice, and I suddenly remember that she’s been staying at Master’s place nearly all the time these days.

Dropping my phone, I grab my apprentice’s delicate shoulders and ask before I realize what I’m doing.

“A- Ai! You know anything about Big Sis? Did Master or Keika tell you something?!”

“No. I’ve only heard what’s on the news.”

She calmly shakes her head from side to side.

But she goes on to add, “I had a feeling this might happen, though. Ever since the 3-*dan* division ended No, the summer festival, Sora-sensei obviously hasn’t been herself.”

“..... Are you saying that I’ve been ignoring her all this time?”

“The opposite.”

“Huh?”

“I think she didn’t want to show you, Master. She only wanted you to see her as a strong, beautiful girl. That’s what I would’ve done if it were me”

She wouldn't show me? Why not?

She lets me see sides of her that she would never show anyone else, right? What Ginko Sora haven't I seen? We lived together for over 10 years, for goodness sake! We're boyfriend and girlfriend!!

"Master," says Ai while my mind spins. "I'm transferring from Kansai to Kanto. The paperwork has already been filed at the association."

"..... What?"

No word that came out of Ai's mouth just now made sense.

"Transferring? To Kanto? Ai, what are you talking about"

That's just as unbelievable as Ginko taking a leave of absence. Thinking this has to be a dream, I snap my fingers a few times next to my ears.

But all that did was hurt.

"Why would you transfer? Are you planning to commute to Tokyo from Osaka for all your matches?"

Ai stays quiet but it doesn't break eye contact.

"Well yes, I know that's basically what you're doing now, but transferring means that you won't have the single match in Osaka! The Kansai Shogi Association building is literally right down the street, so wouldn't it be better to stay put?"

"Master That's not why. The reason is"

Ai looks down, almost like she's in pain. Both hands are squeezing the hem of her skirt like there's no tomorrow.

Then she looks up and says all in one breath.

Words that I can't believe.

“I will live in Tokyo. So—please allow me to move out. I can’t be your live-in apprentice anymore.”

SECOND MATCH

“No.”

A knee-jerk refusal bursts out of my mouth.

“I won’t allow it. Leave here to live in Tokyo? You think that alone will make you stronger? Shogi is not that easy Take your training seriously!!”

“.....”

Ai just clamps her lips tight and endures the storm.

Like she’s trying to keep from talking back, like there’s more emotion she’s trying to keep down So that she won’t change her mind.

That’s when everything suddenly clicks.

“.....?!”

The reason why my apartment didn’t feel like my apartment whenever I came home between matches.

I have to see for myself one more time. Stepping around my apprentice, I go out of my room to check the hallway, living room and bathroom.

“..... Gone Gone. Here, too!”

There isn’t a trace of Ai’s stuff anywhere.

The cup where she kept her toothbrush, the slightly sweet toothpaste she had to have to brush her teeth, even her favorite bath towels, her small umbrella and rain boots are all gone

I was sure they were all at Master’s place just for now, but——.

“You’ve already packed your things? Without telling me?”

Something like anger courses through my veins.

I swore that no matter what happened, I would raise Ai to be the best Shogi player she could possibly be I'd planned on having her be a live-in apprentice until I kept my promise with her parents and turned her into a Women's Title Holder by the time she graduates junior high.

No matter what Ginko said about it, I never wavered. Not once.

Even at my busiest during these title matches, I did my best to make time for the two of us. Maybe I was too busy and didn't make enough time, that's true. But I believed with all my heart that we would get through this.

What about all those laughs we had in Kanazawa?

—Was she already planning to move out when we were there?

I feel betrayed, plain and simple.

That hot knife buried in my back made me lose myself for a moment.

"..... Fine. Let me see just how determined you really are," I growl in a deep voice. "We'll play an even match. If you beat me I'll let you move out."

"..... Okay! I'm ready when you are!!"

She must've been expecting this.

There's a board all ready sitting in the *tatami* room. Ai has been using it as her bedroom since she arrived, but it's just as empty in here now as it was before she moved in.

The last of her stuff is in a neat pile in the corner. One look at it and there's no denying that she really intends to move out.

"..... You're serious, aren't you?"

Ai softly nods as I take a seat at the board. Then she sits down too.

—It feels like I'm reliving that night

Except the girl sitting across the board from me has grown so much compared to that little girl I played back then.

Her perfectly straight posture is making her look even taller than she actually is.

The crisp echoes each piece makes as she lines them up with her dainty hands can only be made by a Shogi player determined to seize victory, a true competitor.

That graceful form made me forget my anger for a moment. Something else is welling up.

—When did she get so big?

Come to think of it, the last time we shared the board was doing the Opening Move Ceremony on New Year's. But when was the last time we played without a handicap? I've been telling her to find ways to get stronger on her own ever since she became a Woman's League player rather than giving her step-by-step instructions, but

There's an old saying in the Shogi world.

Masters play Shogi against their apprentices only twice.

The first time is a test to join the Shogi family, an audition for the apprentice.

The second is to bring an end to their relationship and expel the apprentice from the Shogi world.

And in that even match, it's said that the Master loses on purpose.

"Look how much you've grown since you became my apprentice. So, no matter where life takes you out in society, go with confidence."

It's a form of encouragement.

I like that story.

Stories that tug at the heartstrings have always been my favorite.

However, I'm going to defeat Ai just like I did in our first match. No I won't leave any opportunities for her to come back like I did that night.

As a Dual Title Holder, it's my duty to remind her how harsh the world of professional Shogi is. She needs to hit a tall, thick wall that talent and effort alone can never break.

I say in the same tone I did before our first match, "You may have the first move."

BECAUSE IT GOT SERIOUS

“Haaaaa——.....”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Memories start playing out in my head memories of the first time I played against Master.

I took a deep breath like this one back then, too.

That day, I moved the Pawn in front of my Rook forward with all my strength.

..... But, right now——.

“.....”

I hold it in and can't bring myself to make the first move.

Master?

Do you understand why?

I think the girl I was before would have moved it right away. She would've kept walking straight forward all the way to the ends of the earth.

She'd have Master's fan clenched in her hand, and jump right into his arms like it was nothing.

But the girl I am now can't even slide that one little piece forward

I love Shogi, and I love Master.

I want to be with them forever. I want Master to always be the only one to ever teach me how to play.

But It's scary.

My heart jumps every time I make a move nowadays.

Learning new sequences and seeing my Shogi get better and better used to be

so much fun I couldn't wait until it was my turn, but now making a move scares me

My fingers tremble whenever I snap a piece down.

They tremble so much that I can't use my captured pieces very well.

Making a mistake is scary.

Losing is scary.

I don't hate playing Shogi. Just the opposite.

It has to be because I got serious about it.

Shogi is scary because of how much it means to me. I'm scared of losing something important.

I think the more I fell in love with Shogi the scarier it got.

Um, Master?

I'm terrified right now. So very very terrified.

Because the more I love something, the scarier it gets.

So, you see

I'm afraid of your touch.

I'm afraid of living together.

I'm afraid of your voice. I'm afraid of silence during our conversations.

I'm afraid of being hated, of being rejected, of being abandoned. Being together with you is scary Seeing you looking at other people is scary.

I'm scared.

I'm scared that you'll fall in love with someone else.

I'm scared that you'll find out how I feel.

Umm? Master?

I am not a good girl. I don't deserve to be your apprentice.

I know that we are connected by Shogi.

I know that Shogi is always supposed to be number one.

I know that as a Women's Player, I have to claim a title.

Despite all that, when we spent the day in Kanazawa together without Shogi at all—.

This is what I thought.

If only Shogi didn't exist

If it weren't for Shogi, you'd be a regular boy.

If it weren't for Shogi, you would've never met that girl.

Even without Shogi, I still might've met you.

Even without Shogi, I just know I still would have developed feelings for you.

Can I be honest? I'm still going back and forth on this.

After I learned that she would be leaving the picture, I felt so much all at once that my heart didn't know what to do

"Now I can have Master all to myself!"

"No, no If I don't put some space between us now, I'll never get any stronger"

"But Master can't make it by himself when he's hurting so much, right?"

"Though, she would be hurt if I were the only one who got to be alone with Master, right? That wouldn't be fair at all"



I'm scared.
That's what made
me notice.

Notice that I'm
seriously in love with
you and with Shogi.

DINNER

It's clear just how serious Ai is just by how much time she's taking to make her first move.

"....."

She sits there for a few solid minutes with her eyes closed and her right hand clamped onto her skirt.

Those minutes pass like hours.

For her, this Shogi carries just as much weight as a title match. Those minutes prove it.

However, both of us already know exactly what her first move will be and what formation the board will take.

"..... Hm!!"

Eyes open and brimming with determination, Ai picks up the piece.

Then she puts it down as if every memory, every moment we shared in this room is riding on it. That move—the Pawn in front of her Rook advancing to 2 Six.

Seeing that, I mirror her right away.

The Double Wing Attack.

It's my specialty and the formation Ai used in our first match.

Take a look, Master! I've gotten this much stronger since that day! Ai's fingertips seem to be yelling.

The thing is, I still have my doubts about Ai's resolve.

No

I want to doubt her resolve. I want to look away from how much she's grown Acknowledge it, and there won't be anything I can do

"Haaaa—....."

I concentrate on the board.

Ai spent all that time before her first move, but now there's no hesitation in her sequences. The two of us press forward at a high tempo.

"....."

She peeks up at my face now and then, but her gaze is as sharp as an assassin looking for a window of opportunity.

I can't drop my guard for an instant, not even in the early game.

The first Double Wing that Ai played against me was extremely primitive. All she did was keep pressing forward in a straight line in front of her Rook.

However, there has been a revolution in the Shogi world in the year and a half since then.

It's safe to say that the Double Wing was the epicenter. It's changed that much.

Just hold onto the Pawn from the exchange in front of the Rook to move the King out of the starting position and then advance the third file Pawn to make room for the Knight to advance down the right side. Simple.

This new, stylish Double Wing Attack is now the bread and butter for Static Rook players.

"Every single pro has looked into what software says is the best move to make. If you thought playing that way would give you a lead, you're sorely mistaken."

Ai paid a hefty price for a lesson from Ryo Tsukiyomizaka. Yet she is still trying to use this formation.

“In that case——.”

I open my own wings and advance the edge Pawn.

Compiling tepid moves like this will hide what I’m trying to do and nullify all of her research at the same time. This is the cutting edge of software strategies.

——Avoid the best move and trap her into using sequences that I researched. Do you have an attack strategy ready, Ai?

“.....”

There’s no hesitation in her fingers as Ai sets up her formation.

However, she keeps passing over chances to advance her Knight.

In fact after spending all those moves to get a Silver and her Rook into a forward position, she pulls them back right before our formations clash. It’s strange, like she’s trying to avoid combat altogether.

“.....? Then what was the point of advancing her 3 Six Pawn?”

Ai let her chance for a Rapid Attack slip by without so much as a second glance. Her advantage on offense is gone now, too.

And she is still avoiding confrontation.

It’s true that that’s one way to nullify an opponent’s research, but it also makes both players reset their sequences and reread the board from square one.

All that does is tire you out——.

“..... Wait?”

Reread?

Tire out?

..... Ah!!

“Oh So that’s what’s going on!”

The Double Wing is straightforward, making it extremely easy to read deep into the board.

However the sequences you have to read change with every move. It's a never-ending cycle. People who don't like reading can never make it work.

Ai is drawing out this game to turn it into a reading competition.

It won't end until one of us makes a mistake.

—Does she think she stands a chance against a Dual Title in reading straightforward sequences?! Is that her answer?!!

The two of us have raced to the end of Shogi puzzles hundreds of times, if not more.

That experience must have given Ai tons of confidence. Enough to make her think that she can beat anyone with speed and tenacity alone.

“How arrogant. But I have to give that a perfect score.”

I can't help but be amazed.

A grade school girl who isn't afraid to get into a contest of strength with one of the Shogi world's top pros Not just that, but she can still believe in herself after being thoroughly dismantled in a league match. What other grade schooler in the world even comes close?

Self-assured determination to the point of stubbornly believing in her own strength.

A heart that won't break, a fighting spirit that gets back up stronger after getting knocked down each time.

Now that I know I manage to keep that part of her intact through her training, my heart jumps for joy. I questioned my decisions so much along the way, but they were the right ones.

The thing is—.

“..... Sorry, but I’m going to shatter that spirit of yours right now.”

Since I have an idea what Ai's plan is, I immediately start my own attack. This contest of wills is getting old.

“Hn!!”

Ai switches into battle mode immediately.

We use our Rooks and Bishops to create a detailed masterpiece of sequences across the board!

My Rook advances with a combination of charges and feints like a crafty bull while Ai uses the fancy footwork of a young matador to put bladed Pawns and Lances in place while flashing her Bishop around like a cape.

Once the dust settles—my Rook and her Bishop are staring each other down at opposite ends on the ninth file.

It's the moment of truth.

“ Here ”

There she goes.

“..... Here Here Here Here Here
Here Here Here”

Ai's small frame shakes violently, rocking back and forth.

Not in the late game, but right after a mid game skirmish, Ai puts the pedal to the metal and goes full throttle!

"Here Here Here Here Here Here Here
Here, here, here, here, here,
hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere
hereherehrehere——."

She has a natural gift for high-speed calculation.

The Shogi gods gave this girl the fastest high-speed engine for a brain

humanity has ever seen.

Ai's talent was already as sharp as a knife the first time we played. The two Rooks she claimed during our exchanges back then glistened like blades as she set up for the killing checkmate.

Those knives have grown into long, full-fledged *katana*—swords that she's about to draw right now.

“Here!!”

Light slices across the board. Ai's Bishop disappears in a flash.

The result—the piece I had protecting the corner is gone.

“..... Huh?”

I lean in for a closer look.

“Wh- why would?”

“Go ahead and promote your Rook.”

That's the only thing it could mean.

I was sure she'd lunge at me with those swords But she drops them and holds her arms out wide like she wants to be cut down?

—Allow me to make a Dragon, and then capture it?

If that's her plan, the trap is way too obvious.

Whether she's inviting me or not If I don't promote the Rook right now, I'm as good as dead.

“.....”

I push all the way into enemy territory and promote to Dragon King.

Ai is probably planning to trap it in the corner and take it, but

From what I've read, trying to do that would only end up deepening her wounds.

—I'll have the advantage if I can get the Dragon back on my side. Even if she takes it, I'll have the edge.

I'll come out ahead no matter what decisions she makes.

"Herehereherehereherehere———HERE!!"

Ai pulls her own Rook all the way to the back row to threaten my Dragon horizontally and to keep it from unleashing havoc. Does that mean she gave up on trying to take it?

—My read was spot on! You have a long way to go, Ai.

I slide my Dragon back into my territory. Adding Shogi's strongest piece to my ranks not only increases my offensive firepower but bolsters my defense as well. Checking to make sure that I'm ahead, I breathe a big sigh of relief.

Then, it happens.

Ai reaches for her piece stand with the speed of a ravenous monster.

"HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERRRRRRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!"

She picks up—a Lance.

Then, she snaps that little piece down in front of the Rook she pulled back!!

"—Here!!"

In essence, Ai has built a missile launcher on the board.

"C-Crap! She pulled it back to make space for the Lance!!"

A Rook in the back row can be a powerful shield.

However, it was part of Ai's attack strategy!

She forced me to focus on defending the left side while she was concentrating on setting up a massive counterattack on the right!! Strong!!

"..... Wait. There's more to it than that?"

The more sequences I read across the board, the more my body starts to

tremble.

Ai would have to have read deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deeper than I ever thought she could to lead me to this point Knowing that she pulled it off is making me shiver from head to toe.

“Sh-She She!!”

So much for a cute little *katana*.

That toy ax Ika Sainokami flings around doesn’t measure up, either.

Ai’s sharp talent.

It’s—a long, menacing scythe.

—Sneaks behind the opponent’s neck while they’re distracted and sends their head flying.

Staring down at the board that looks more like a Shogi puzzle, I finally figure it out.

This isn’t the mid game anymore in her eyes.

That terrifying calculation speed of hers has transformed this newly completed skirmish into a late game formation.

She didn’t deploy that Lance to *push forward*.

—Ai is already *closing in*!!

I can’t block everything!! D-Did I just lose?!

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher Here!!”

Ai rushes in with her Lance leading the charge!

I could swear she’s got a pair of white wings coming out of her back as she leans all the way over the board.

Those wings open wide, swallowing the board and my whole thought

process at the same time.

“Ngh!! Haaa Haaa *Gasp!* Nggghhh!!”

The sheer volume that Ai has read is overwhelming.

My King is a sitting duck. The more I read, the more inevitable my defeat becomes

“Ngh Too hot

The sun must be low in the sky, because the sunbeams coming in have heated the room quite a bit.

Much too hot My throat is a desert at this point

When... suddenly.

Slide A cup of water appears in front of me.

“!! *Glug*

Ai must have gotten it for me while I was thinking. I finally get my bearings back the very moment that chilled liquid my body was craving hits my lips.

But at the same time, a different fear the realization that Ai could read that far into *me* sinks into my gut right along with it

—This girl has studied me down to the last detail

Any other person would base their decisions on my titles and rating. Basically, they put me up on a pedestal as the Demon King or something and trip over their own feet.

However, Ai sees me just as *Yaichi Kuzuryu*.

Not some digits on a screen.

This is Shogi between two human beings who know all there is to know about each other A battle that will turn bloody.

In that case!!

“Whew——..... Thanks, Ai.”

That’s all I say.

Reaching for my piece stand, I grab a Lance and deploy it directly behind her Promoted Lance.

“!! Huh? Huuh?!!”

Her eyes go wide for a second, but not because my move was all that spectacular.

“Master acknowledged he’s behind? I can win!!”

It’s a desperation move, one that tries to force the formations in my favor despite knowing it’s a bad move.

Basically, I’m repenting.

I start unloading all of my treasures, like Golds and Silvers, from my piece stand one after another to try to block Ai’s Rook. My formation gets beaten to a pulp in exchange for delaying her attack.

It’s like something out of a fairy tale.

A monster is hot on my tail, and I’m scattering Golds and Silvers from the treasure chest in my arms, hoping to distract it as I run away.

The balance I had barely managed to maintain up to this point is now heavily in Ai’s favor

“Hngh! Gahhh! Haaaaa! Ngh! H- Here, here, here, hereherehereherehereherehere——.”

The pressure of knowing she has a chance to win her first even match against a Dual Title is clamping down hard on Ai right now. But she uses her overwhelmingly powerful reading ability to lighten the load and chips my defenses apart piece by piece.

Then—the 119th move.

After nearly 60 moves of her approach.

“HERE!!!”

Ai snaps a Bishop down diagonally behind my King with vigor.

I’m in check.

There’s even a Dragon next to the Bishop. I’m against the ropes with two big pieces right in my face!

Now.

“KHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

I place my finger on my King to spring my trap now that Ai thinks victory is in the bag.

I slide it.

Just one space to the side.

“F- 5 Two King?! How could that defense work?!”

Now it’s Ai’s turn to be surprised.

Slipping past her Bishop by the thinnest of margins adds even more pressure by making her think that I’ve read all the way to the end.

“B-But, I still! Here!!”

Ai plays it safe because she knows just how far ahead she is.

Unfortunately, doing so takes the razor’s edge away from her attack. A bad move.

Now that it’s my turn, I unleash this sequence I’ve had cooking for a while now.

“Right back at you.”

I deploy a Lance in front of my King. It’s the same kind of defensively offensive move that Ai played earlier. Not only does it protect my King, but it also puts

hers in the line of fire.

“Ngh!!”

Ai recoils and touches her cheek as if she had just been slapped.

Following up, I deploy a Bishop deep in her territory.

It's a flashy move, one that lets me take either her Rook or Gold.

This is why I scattered all those Golds, Silvers and whatnot earlier, so that her formation wouldn't be as crisp.

“Ah! Grr!!”

Fear passes over her face, but she immediately follows the saying don't run from a fork in the road and puts a Pawn down dangerously close to my King.

She tried to find a path by attacking rather than defending.

“So you took my teaching to heart. Good girl”

But that triggers the real trap.

If Ai had chosen to strengthen her defenses away from my Bishop, then this match would still be up in the air.

I let her Pawn be and take her Gold to promote my Bishop into a Horse and launch an attack of my own at the same time.

I've read to the end, so I know my attack will connect first.

“It's over. Your Shogi is still too sincere.”

“?! Aaagh”

She would've had so many chances if she kept charging forward without stopping to think.

The nine-year-old Ai probably would have checkmated me by now.

Everything she's learned during our time living together and her own feelings made her mess up.

Even though she knows me through and through.

I also know her like the back of my hand.

“He- re”

Ai rushes to make an escape route for her King, but it’s too late.

She throws up a prayer by putting my King in check, but she doesn’t have the firepower to pin it down.

Meanwhile, I guide my King across the board using zero time.

—I won But a Dual Title like me shouldn’t have come that close to the brink

Objectively speaking, Ai’s Shogi is far beyond Women’s League level.

—Her abilities have caught up with her talent. She’ll blow everything up in no time

The rivers of cold sweat running down my body prove how much Ai has grown.

The small glimmer of a prodigy on the cusp of hatching in front of me is now on the verge of becoming a blinding beacon.

Ai’s decision to break away from me, her Master.

Whether it’s right or not the Shogi shows a clear answer.

I’ve avoided directly teaching Ai anything up to this point.

I set up the perfect learning environment and played tons of handicapped matches with her. However, I never forced Ai to memorize early game sequences or the latest research the pros are using.

Because Ai’s talent works best off a blank slate.

All of that, including forbidding her from using software, was to instill one single lesson into her mind.

Become strong on your own.

I made her think of ways to make herself stronger.

That type of teaching leads to only one logical conclusion—*leaving her Master.*

So I should be happy right now.

Happy that Ai wants to leave this nest If she wants to spread her wings in the bluer skies over Tokyo, it is my duty as her Master to give her a push out the door.

And if she refuses to leave despite having wings capable of flight it's up to me to drive her away with an iron fist.

—Have I been finding reasons to keep her here because I don't want her to leave?

If I force Ai to stay.

If I chain down the wings that are trying to take flight.

Would it be just my ego keeping this fledgling cooped up in this room when she comes close to grasping her own method to grow, with or without the use of software?

“..... I”

Do I just want her in Ginko's place?

Those thoughts made me put on the brakes.

“Ah.”

Deploying a Gold, the safe move.

The move that was meant to ensure that my King was protected is now blocking its retreat!

If I had just kept it moving, the match would be as good as over!!

“Agh?!”

It hits me the second I make the move.

I realize my mistake the instant I let go of the piece. I had no clue while my forefinger was still touching it.

That’s what is called an error.

“!! Here, here, hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere——.”

Ai starts rocking back and forth with the same ferocity as a carnivore lunging for prey.

——Oh oh crap!! Defend the wrong way now, and I’ll be checkmated!!

A fresh wave of panic takes over as I dial back in.

Each of us makes little mistakes back and forth from there.

After losing focus just that once, our emotions start showing up on the board. Uncertainty makes our fingers waiver, and our precision suffers for it.

I make a mistake, Ai makes a mistake. Those crisp, hard-hitting sequences at the beginning of a match feel like a distant dream as we trade unthinkable moves. This match has regressed to the point where people would think two newbies were playing.

Our hearts’ last line of defense is getting torn to shreds——.

“..... D- n’t”

I play a move, and Ai’s genuine feelings come across like words.

“..... n’t want to”

We exchange turns at lightning speed. Our feelings overlap, and the pieces on the board start moving in unison to it.

“I don’t want to go!”

“Please don’t go!”

“I don’t want to go!!”

“Please don’t go!!”

“I don’t want to go!!!”

“Please don’t!!!”

Our fingers scream back and forth as we repeat the same sequence, delaying the inevitable conclusion.

Unfortunately, Shogi’s cruel rules won’t allow it

Just four repeated moves bring it all to an end.

A repetition draw.

Normally, this would call for a rematch with me on offense instead. There are even some amateur tournaments where both players will take a loss if it happens.

“.....”

Motionless pieces cast long shadows across the board.

The setting sun casts Ai in an orange glow across from me as she stares into her lap, waiting for me to say something.

“Ai.”

“.....!”

Hearing her name, she looks up at me expectantly.

Like a puppy, just like she did the day she asked to become my apprentice in this very room

All I have to say is, “One more?” like I did back then, and everything will surely

go back to the way it was.

So I say ...

“That’s enough. It’s over.”

And I turn my back on her.

I just know I’ll try to stop her if I look at her face right now. I’ll beg her not to leave, jump over the board and hug her right here and now

“Ah

I can almost feel Ai reaching out for my back from the other side of the board. If I were to reach back like the opening of a Double Wing, our hands would meet in the middle.

But I can’t do that.

My duty as her Master is to drive her out of the nest the pain from her not talking to me about this first and a bit of pride won’t let me say otherwise

“Master I I ——.”

I’ve changed my mind! Please forgive me! I want to stay!!

Part of me is hoping that’s what she’s about to say.

But the words that came next——.

“I made dinner for you

Were out of concern for me.

All the other emotions get washed away by that lovable kindness of hers.

Forget about Shogi. All I want right now is for this girl to stay with me.

Ai!!

“..... I tried making something new for you for dinner. It’s in a pot on the stove so please eat it, okay?”

She’s trying to sound cheerful, but I can tell Ai is desperate to keep her emotions under control.

Her voice is wavering and there’s nothing she can do to stop it.

“I made food for tomorrow, too And the next day, and the day after that There’s a week’s worth in the freezer Please be sure to eat properly before your next title match. I also used my salary from the association to buy a dryer for you so that laundry doesn’t pile up It will be delivered tomorrow So make sure to do laundry every day, okay? All you have to do is press a button, so you should be okay without me here!”

Plip, plip. Tears hit the *tatami* mat as she talks.

Meanwhile, I’m biting my lip as if my life depended on it. The taste of blood is getting stronger every second. An irony, bitter taste of regret.

So bitter and so painful, in fact, that I’m crying my eyes out even though I’m 18 years old.

—It’s a very good thing I turned my back to her

Seeing me Seeing her Master break down like this would surely weaken Ai’s resolve.

The last thing I can do for her is push her out the door with a heavy dose of tough love!

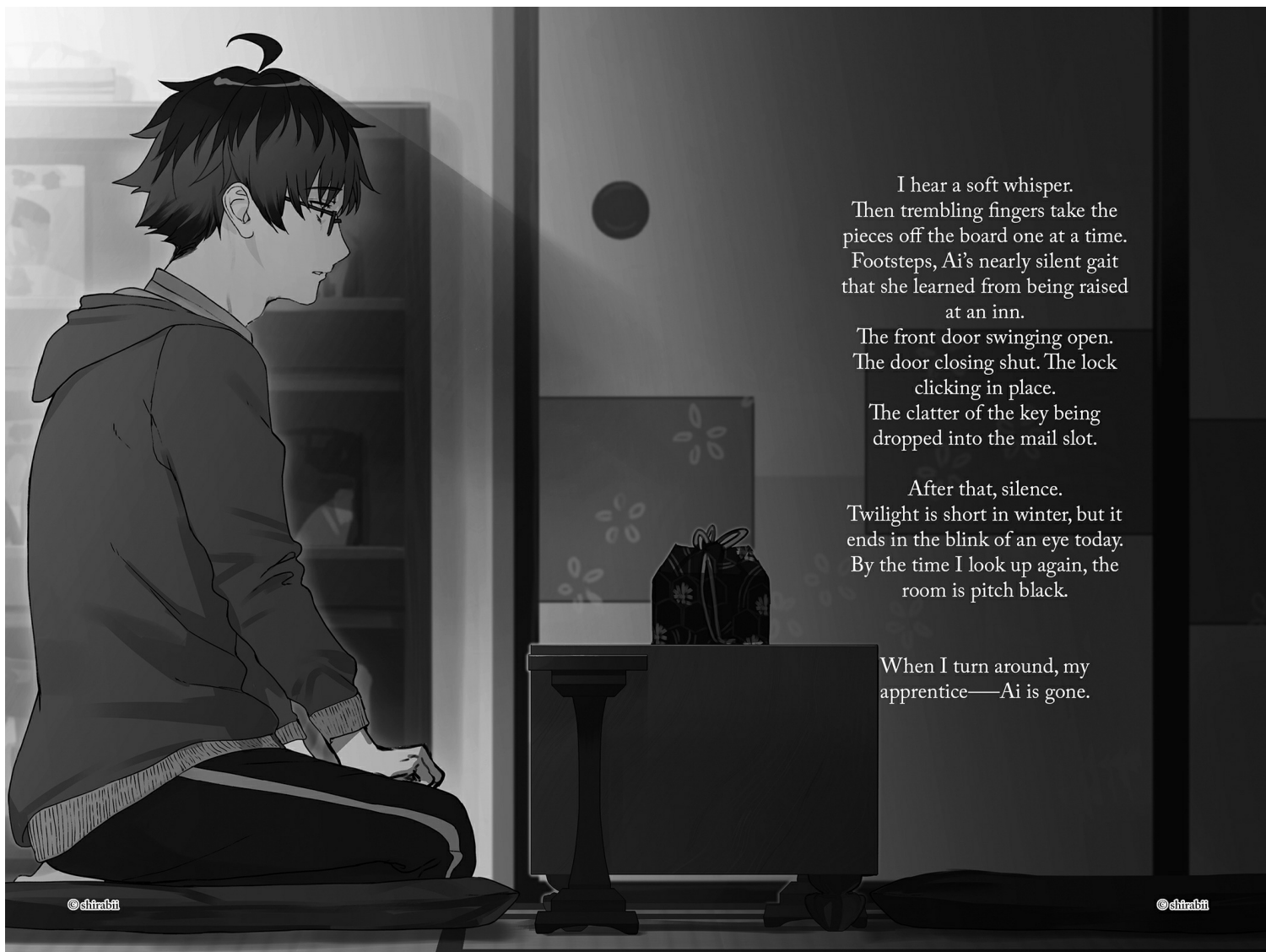
“Please win the Ryuo Title Match, okay?” says Ai encouragingly. “You have a habit of focusing on Shogi so much that you forget about everything else I asked Keika to come check on you. So you’ll be just fine, right? E- Even if I I’m not here!!”

She tries to keep going, but full words don’t make it out of her mouth.

Tear drops pitter patter onto the *tatami*, overlapping like rain.

Then, just as the rain lifts.

“..... Thank you so much... for everything”



I hear a soft whisper.
Then trembling fingers take the
pieces off the board one at a time.
Footsteps, Ai's nearly silent gait
that she learned from being raised
at an inn.

The front door swinging open.
The door closing shut. The lock
clicking in place.
The clatter of the key being
dropped into the mail slot.

After that, silence.
Twilight is short in winter, but it
ends in the blink of an eye today.
By the time I look up again, the
room is pitch black.

When I turn around, my
apprentice—Ai is gone.

FAMILY FLAVOR

“Yaaaichiii? I know you’re in there. YA-I-CHIII!”

Knock, knock! Knockknockknockknock!

“How long are you going to keep sulking alone in there? That does it, I’m coming in. I warned you!!”

Click.

The person who used a spare key to come inside is Keika.

Even if she hadn’t said anything, I would’ve known it was her. Only three people have a key to my apartment. One of them left theirs in the mail slot on the way out, and another has disappeared from society with the key along with her.

Therefore, Keika must be the one. It’s a simple three-step checkmate.

“..... Ai really did leave, didn’t she?” says Keika, looking at all the empty space in my apartment. Sounding lonely, too.

How shameless

“You knew, didn’t you? Not just about Ai, but Ginko, too Pulling strings behind my back while pretending to be my friend all this time. I thought you were on my side, Keika.”

“I am now and always have been on your side, Yaichi. We’re family.”

“Family? Hah!”

That’s the last word I want to hear right now.

“Ai Ai was family to me, too. We lived together for crying out loud. But she still just up and goes. All that’s left is one lousy pot of food on the stove!” I yell, pointing at the kitchen.

All the food that Ai made is still sitting in the freezer, untouched.

She made all my favorites, but I just can't bring myself to eat them.

I mean, how could they taste good if I'm all by myself?

Knowing that this is what's best for my apprentice isn't helping at all.

Actually, it's because I know Because she reached that answer on her own that I'm suffering so badly right now.

Because we've reached that point

Ai is already long gone——.

"This is *onishime*."

"..... Huh?"

Keika says something completely irrelevant while looking into the pot.

"Not just lousy food. It has a proper name, you know? *Onishime*."

"What does that have to do with anything?! Knowing the name won't change——."

"Yaichi. Do you know how *onishime* is made?" asks Keika with a hint of nostalgia, her eyes still glued to the pot. "We used to make it around New Year's, remember? It was one of the few special dishes that both you and Ginko never finished, though."

"..... It's just a pot of boiled food. It's not like you can only eat that on New Year's. Besides, children don't like boiled stuff much anyway."

"That's true. I didn't understand what was so good about it back when my mother was still alive."

She starts rummaging around in the cabinets for dishes.

"But after she passed away and Father and I moved into Grandma Noda's house where we live right now, she taught me how to make it. Now

onishime is one of my favorites.”

“Why?”

“Because the whole family goes into it.”

Fam ily?

That word is simultaneously the one I don’t want to hear and also the word that my cooled-off heart wants more than anything. Those syllables lining up both constrict and warm me from the inside.

Hot, slicing pain spreads from head to toe

“These scraggy potatoes are our Master. The carrot slices cut like flowers are me. The thin, white strips of burdock are Ginko. The fast-growing bamboo shoots are Ai. And you are these jiggly blocks of konjac maybe?”

She explains while scooping some of each into a small bowl and puts it on the table in front of me.

“Ah

Finally seeing what was in that pot is like peering into a little treasure chest.

One look is all it takes to know how much time and love went into it. I think I know what Ai was feeling when she made it.

As proof there’s a little detail in here that only I would understand.

“Hmm?”

Keika notices too and says, a little confused, “This *onishime* has fried tofu in it. I’ve never seen that before

“..... Because it’s *konishime*.”

“Ko *nishime*? What’s that?”

“I didn’t remember until you brought it up. It’s from my hometown a

recipe from Fukui. I remember it showing up in school lunch in kindergarten sometimes and my parents made——.”

Then it hits me.

Taking out my smartphone, I scroll through my message history to find one that I got about a month ago from my brother.

“Yaichi. You hanging in there? Sorry to bug you, but there’s something I’ve got to ask.”

It’s dated from right before the Third Crown Title Match.

Before Ai and I went to Kanazawa.

“The head chef asked me for our New Year’s *konishime* recipe. You know, the one Mom always made? It seems like Miss Hinatsuru wants to make it for you. Did you ask her to? Don’t put too much pressure on her, okay?”

——..... Ai!!

A silent scream escapes my lips as I finally tried to put myself in her shoes.

What was going through her head? Why didn’t she tell me anything?

Why was she so giddy in Kanazawa?

——Why couldn’t I pick up on what she was struggling with?!!

“Yaichi. Do you know what the most important ingredient is for *onishime*?”

“.....?”

She realizes that I don’t have an answer, so she gives it to me.

An answer I never expected.

“The ingredient that gives *onishime* its flavor—— is time.”

“..... Time?”

“That’s right. Most dishes taste best when they’re hot out of the oven, don’t you think? But there are some like *onishime* that are more flavorful after

they've had time to sit and cool off. The ingredients need to soak up all the broth That's why its name means to boil to soak up."

I look down at the cold dish in front of me while Keika continues.

"Ginko and Ai haven't abandoned you. They just need time to step away and figure a few things out."

Really? Is that kind of time really necessary?

Don't love and affection go away once they've cooled off, like the best part of a fresh-cooked meal?

I give her a doubtful glance, but Keika looks like she's doing everything she can to keep her own pain at bay.

Then she says, "Just like how I needed time away from Shogi."

".....! Kei ka!"

"Ginko didn't choose to take a leave of absence to run away from Shogi. People online and in the media are saying all sorts of things, criticizing her, calling her spineless and irresponsible But it's just the opposite."

The opposite? Opposite how——?

"If she didn't step away now, she'd be forced into doing placement matches. She'd have to forfeit the way she is now, end up getting demoted and be further away from her goal than ever"

Ginko's goal as a pro.

Was it to win league matches?

Or was she trying to win a title?

Keika says the real answer is neither.

"The day she could play Yaichi Kuzuryu in a league match as a professional would never come."

“.....!!”

“After all the fanfare when she was promoted! After losing her debut match to a Women’s League Player! After just one professional match, she chose to step away! Surely you understand how painful that is, how much courage it takes!! Ginko willingly chose to feed herself to the wolves!”

Why?

Keika gives me that answer, too.

“All so that she could play against you!!!”

Ahh So, that’s what it was all about

Ginko didn’t run away from Shogi or me.

She made the best move that would allow her to fight another day.

She really is a Shogi player to the bones

“On top of that she’s fighting an even more painful battle right now. It’s something that she has to overcome by herself”

—Something even more painful?

What could ever be more painful for Ginko than not being able to play Shogi? I can’t fathom it.

“That’s as much as I can tell you. Look into it on your own if you want to know more. I won’t stop you. Though I think you have more important things to do.”

“But there’s so much I don’t understand Why does everyone just decide things without asking me?”

“Everyone loves you, Yaichi. Their feelings are too strong, so they overthink, which sometimes makes them make mistakes Just like in Shogi.”

That makes so much sense it hurts.

Because I’ve made so many bad moves myself.

“That bearded geezer of ours feels the same way. He seems to have a different way of going about it than I do, though

“Master, too?”

Forbidding us to date out of nowhere like that.

Was there more to it? Was he reading deeper into this than I thought?

I had a feeling, but I simply refused to listen to him. I didn’t want to hear what he had to say about apprentices striking out on their own

“Everything will work out! Even I found my way, so those two will come back stronger than ever, I guarantee it!”

“..... Will they come back? I don’t deserve them

“If you don’t have faith, Yaichi, who will? You are *the* Dragon King, aren’t you? Then it’s up to you to get so strong that they have a place to come back to!”

Strong enough to protect?

Shogi is not all about offense.

You have to be willing to bide time to let the opponents show their hand, to understand their intentions in order to become truly strong.

Time spent on defense is scary.

So much scarier than attacking.

Even so Even so, I——.

“Both of them want to play Shogi against you,” says Keika in a quiet but firm voice, like trying to convince a child. “They’ve chosen the difficult path so they no, all so that they might have a chance to make it a reality. Then, it’s up to you to stay at the very top. You wouldn’t want them to lose their way would you?”

“..... No

It's finally clear. I know what work must be done as the Ryuo, as a Dual Title.

Get stronger.

Not just normal strong, not just normal intensity, but more like the Meiji
No, I have to outshine him as a Shogi player from an even higher plateau.

I can't stay as I am now. I have to change from the challenger to the one
who rises to meet them.

"I will reach the summit."

I swear to myself in my chilly apartment. Swear to never let this small flame in
my heart ever go out.

As long as I'm standing above everyone else—those two will never lose sight
of me.

Three days have passed since Ginko Sora 4-*dan* announced her leave of absence. The Shogi association hosted a press conference in which Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu offered further details in the absent Sora 4-*dan*'s place. Here is a brief recap:

—What is her reason for taking a leave of absence?

“For her health. The association has received the necessary documentation from medical professionals.”

—Why did she make this decision?

“While missing a scheduled match results in a defeat, that is not the case for a player on a leave of absence. The largest factor was avoiding a demotion point in the Placement League that starts in June, however I’m certain that she wanted to participate nonetheless.”

—Is retirement a possibility?

“Absolutely not.”

—What of the two Women’s Titles in her possession?

“Sora 4-*dan* has expressed her desire to renounce both the Queen and Women’s Throne titles. Discussions are underway with the sponsors. In the event an agreement is reached, both titles will be granted to the winner of the Challenge Match of the respective leagues. However, the Challenge Match will be extended to five matches.”

—Where is Sora 4-*dan* being treated right now?

“I am not at liberty to answer that, but rest assured that she is in good hands. Please allow her the time she needs to recover and await her return.”

Sora 4-*dan* released the following statement.

“Allow me to begin by offering my most sincere apologies to my supporters and everyone who has assisted me through the years within the Shogi world for deciding to take a leave of absence at this time.

“I have been experiencing acute fatigue and high fevers during matches dating back to the middle of the 3-*dan* division last season. It became apparent that I would be unable to produce match records worthy of professional Shogi in my condition. Therefore, I decided to seek treatment.

“I am truly sorry for the timing of this announcement right after my debut match.

“You have my word that I will commit myself to returning even one day earlier in order to fulfill my duty as a professional Shogi player.”

Sora 4-*dan*’s younger brother apprentice, Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu, was asked about her situation at a press conference the day before the Third Ryuo Title Match.

“I wasn’t involved in the decision at all. I still haven’t heard anything from her. If this is a choice she made as a pro, then it’s not my place to object Not to mention we’re both pro players. We convey ourselves better through Shogi rather than words.”

Keeping his word, Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* went on to play like a man possessed to widen his series lead to 2 to 1.

During the review session, Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* was spotted gently caressing a Silver piece on his piece stand more often than usual.

(Mato)

On the night after losing her debut match to Ika Sainokami, Ginko penned a leave of absence notice and prepared a statement for the press in her small room on the fifth floor of the Kanto Shogi Association. The intense heat within her body left over from the match had yet to subside and hindered her at every turn as she shifted her focus to writing one last message.

What she had already written was for the whole world to see.

This message was for only one person.

“I’m sorry for doing this without telling you first. I’m sorry for not telling you what is wrong with me, too. I didn’t want you to worry If only those excuses were enough. Meanwhile, I’m cursing this body of mine to no end.

“Your marriage proposal made me so happy. Happier than I’ve ever been in my life. I honestly thought I was dreaming. I wanted to hear you say it again and again, which is why I couldn’t say yes right away.

“The future that you laid out for us sounded so wonderful that I started growing my hair out. All so that you would love me even more

“The reason I didn’t say anything is because I didn’t want to give up on that future. I wanted to keep on dreaming. If I opened up and told you everything, you would have given up that future, too I made this decision on my own to keep that from happening. I’m sorry. Not that you would understand with me telling you about it like this.

“Shogi is all I know How to say these things, what words to use, I don’t

even know where to start. I'm not sure if I have the right to say this, but here it goes——.

“I love you. You and only you. I can't imagine myself with anyone else but you.

“So please wait for me. Wait until I can play Shogi again Once I'm active, I'll say it loud and clear then.

“That I became a professional to play against Yaichi Kuzuryu.”

Ginko poured her heart and soul into the message but was unable to send it.

To this day it still remains sealed in her heart.

EPILOGUE

A chime in the distance. It must be five o'clock.

“..... Man, it's cold”

New Year's Eve in Osaka, and there's actually snow on the ground. That almost never happens. I'm in my frosty apartment, laying on the floor of the *tatami* room without any of the joy from claiming the Crown Title or relief from defending my Ryuo Title to keep me company. My heart is as empty as the pot in my arms.

Sunlight reflecting off the snow outside is making it surprisingly bright in here.

But I don't have the energy or will power to close the curtain or switch on the lights.

Ai Hinatsuru hasn't even been gone two months. But this room has gotten so messy since then, it's unrecognizable.

This apartment used to be so clean, bright and warm but now it's nothing but a cold, concrete prison cell in my eyes.

And there's a knock on my cell's door.

Knock! Knock! Knock! Click!

Creak, creak, creak. I can tell someone came inside without bothering to take off their shoes, but that's no reason for me to get up off the floor. If a robber broke it, they're more than welcome to take my life along with whatever they happen to find in here——.

“Hmph! What a pigsty! There's hardly any room to walk!” says the one who came in with dirty shoes. It's obvious who's there.

I ask my arrogant visitor from inside my futon, “..... How did you get in?”

“How? This building is mine now, so of course I would have a key.”

“Come again?”

“I bought the property. Simply put, I own this piece of real estate.”

“WH——?!!”

Why the hell would you do that?! is what I was going to ask, but Ai Yashajin beats me to it.

“Well, I plan on knocking down this outdated shack and building a proper apartment in its place as soon as possible. Thus, I’m here to discuss my plans with the tenants, like yourself. It goes without saying that I will be providing compensation and cover all moving fees.”

“..... I refuse.”

“Why nooot? Don’t tell me you think everything will go back to the way it was if you wait right there hugging that piece of metal, do you, Sensei?”

Ai kicks the pot—the one that Ai Hinatsuru made *konishime* in before she left—out of my arms like a soccer ball and then launches into a tirade.

“What would Kanto players do if they knew the ultimate Demon King of the West they feared so much was cuddling an empty pot and lounging around on a futon that smells worse than moldy tofu? Probably die of anguish, that’s what. The humiliation that *this guy* took two titles from them would be too much to bear!”

“.....”

“Well, they’d probably take out their frustration at losing to said Demon King on his apprentice. She’s so much easier to bully now that she is in Kanto.”

After laughing at her own joke, Ai corrects herself.

“Oh, wait a minute. She’s not your apprentice anymore, is she? Or are you still technically together? Like a married couple living in separate houses? The

Worldly Maestro had a similar arrangement, didn't he? Still, it's as good as over——."

"Shut up, will you?! Did you come all the way here to rub that in my face?!"

I keep yelling so she can't get a word in.

"I already know, okay?! I'm a washed-up Shogi player who got abandoned by both his apprentice and his girlfriend!! I'm a world-class idiot who kept his titles but lost what he really wanted!!"

Winning matches used to get me anything.

Shogi gave me, a guy who never went to high school, more fame and fortune than I knew what to do with. It gave me friends, a second father in my Master, a girlfriend, apprentices, everything.

But the stronger I got the lonelier I became.

Kanto's young pros treat me like a monster. I got told to my face that Ika Sainokami and I are the same. I denied it back then, but now I think that assessment was spot on.

Ika and I are missing something vital as human beings. I'm not better than other people, just Shogi filled up whatever part of my brain is missing.

I believe in Ai Hinatsuru. I believe in Ginko.

I believe that their feelings for me haven't changed. Surely, they'll come back to me someday.

But I feel just as strongly that——.

"Everyone's going to leave me eventually, so what's the point?! Every time I reach a new plateau, I get further away from being a normal person, from knowing what normal happiness is like!! That cycle is gonna go on for years and years, I'll end up a broken mess, and lose my titles in the end!! I'll lose everything if I keep playing Shogi!!"

“You have me.”

“..... Come again?”

I have her? What’s that supposed to mean?

She’s totally lost me, but Ai Yashajin unleashes another irritated salvo.

“Hah! How incredibly vexing! Listen up, Trash *Kuzu*, and listen well!!” Then she grabs my collar with both hands, lifts me out from under the covers and says, “I’m saying that I’ll live with you.”

It took her spelling it out like that for me to finally notice.

Ai’s lips have turned blue.

On those small shoulders, in her long black hair even her eyelashes have bits of snowflakes on them.

Almost like she’s been standing outside, staring up at my apartment for hours

“..... Am I not good enough?”

Oh Now I get it

This is the first time I’ve seen who the girl Ai Yashajin really is.

There’s a gaping hole in my heart after the most important people in my life disappeared right before my eyes.

Shogi was the only place I had left to run, but it could never fill the hole entirely. This girl has been carrying that same despair since the first day we met.

So——.

I instinctively take those tiny, shivering hands cupping them between mine.

What came to the room that Snow White and my angelic apprentice had left

was

A young Cinderella—who had cast aside both her glass slippers and her pride.



FOR THE AFTERWORD

“I’m thinking I’ll end the story after five books.”

It’s been over five years since I said that to my editor right after Book 1 was released, and here we are at Book 14.

Quite a bit has changed over that span. There are now eight professional Shogi titles for men and women, and COVID-19 has made masks the norm for matches.

I based The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done! on real events that took place in the Shogi world.

However, as things that I never thought possible occurred in real life, I have had to make several adjustments along the way. The icing on the cake is that reality seems so much more interesting and I’m not sure I can compete

Yes, a lot has changed over these past five years.

That being said I’m still writing the story I want to write five years after I started, including the last scene.

I had given up on ever being able to write it, so I’ll never forget how happy I am to include it at the end of this series. I won’t be taking my foot off the gas until the very last word!

**REVIEW
SESSION**

REVIEW SESSION

“This the place?”

“It is indeed.”

A small, orange hybrid car pulled into a parking spot outside of a facility deep in the mountains.

“‘Bout time That drive took for freakin’ ever. Whew.”

“I was the one behind the wheel, if you remember.”

Machi Kugui placed the sunglasses she had worn since the beginning of the drive on the dashboard while speaking to her friend in the passenger seat.

“What would you prefer, *O-Ryou?*”

“I’ll wait in the car. I’d slug her the second I saw her face if I went in,” said Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, bumping her clenched fists together. Then she reached for her breast pocket with routine precision.

Just before closing the car door behind her, Machi leaned back inside and said without a moment’s hesitation, “Do not smoke in my car.”

Ryou snapped her tongue with a frustrated, “Tch,” and pinned her yet unlit cigarette between her nose and upper lip as she flopped back into her seat to take a nap.

“Good grief That is an illness she should seek treatment for while we’re here,” remarked Machi with a grimace as she strode up to the building.

Strangely enough, no one paid any attention to her when she went inside.

Machi was not obstructed in any way. *That was how it was arranged.*

“Let’s see: Room 18 Room 18 Ah, that’s the one.”

She took a quick, yet deep breath.

Machi then knocked but went inside without waiting for a response.

“That is quite the *how did you find me?* look adorning your face.”

The person she had wanted to meet was there inside that room, basking in the sunlight and enjoying the soft breeze coming through the window.

—Ahhh It has been a while. Same goes for the trembling that accompanies seeing her with my own eyes

Machi instantly regretted leaving her sunglasses in the car.

Pretending to look around the room in order to hide the tears building in her eyes, she gave her leery host an explanation for her sudden visit.

“Allow me to say this up front, Keika did not divulge your location. Adults have connections that children would not understand. So long as you remain within this country’s borders, eluding me is simply impossible. May I have a seat?”

She pulled a chair up to the bed without waiting for a response yet again and sat down.

Then, obviously avoiding direct eye contact, Machi flashed a grin and said, “Please, remain at ease. I have come alone. And I shall not reveal anything discussed today without obtaining your consent beforehand That includes to *Yaichi*.”

Two dainty shoulders quivered.

—Had she always been so slender?

Though Ginko had been thin throughout her life, she looked downright frail wearing a thin white hospital gown.

—Then, it was a purely competitive spirit that made her appear daunting

Machi felt a renewed sense of awe for the girl before her.

The all-powerful presence she possessed at a Shogi board was nowhere to be found.

Machi was at a loss as to how this feeble little girl had made it through the 3-*dan* division's hellish landscape.

Even that she managed to survive at all.

"Quite the tranquil hideaway you have found. Perfect for convalescing. The world at large is far too boisterous and dusty. How lovely it would be to dwell here and write for a living Though *O-Ryou* seemed less than impressed and is currently indulging in an afternoon snooze in the passenger seat of my vehicle."

Machi nonchalantly revealed that *Ryou Tsukiyomizaka* was in fact on the premises, but there was no tremor in the girl's shoulders this time around.

So, it was true. Only *Yaichi's* name could reach this girl's heart.

"Now then. I would like to continue the exclusive interview where we left off."

Up until that precise moment, Machi had been unsure what to ask.

"How much time has transpired since you have been unable to play Shogi, Ginko?"

"You see her?"

"Yes."

The sun had nearly set by the time Machi returned to the car.

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka leaned all the way out of her seat to get answers.

"So, how was she?"

"Had you been so interested, you should have accompanied me to begin with."

“Hah!! All I care about is when the heck she’s comin’ back! I don’t give a crap about her health!” Ryou grumbled, crossing her arms and sticking her feet up onto the dashboard. “..... So? How’s she lookin’?”

“Slender

Machi was unsure how to convey what she had just witnessed.

“Undoubtably, she will remain here to recover for some time to come. I did not ascertain any information not already made public by the association.”

“Tch! Then we came all the way out here for nothing! I was gonna pull her out by a chain ’round her neck no matter what the whitecoats had to say about it!!”

“Go through with that, O-Ryou, and you would have been dragged away with chains around your wrists,” said Machi with a forced grin as she started the engine.

Ryou put her feet down and returned her seat back to the upright position.

“I’ll drive us back. Got some shuteye already, so I’m good to go.”

“There’s no need.”

“Why the heck not?! Don’t tell me you’re one of those *nobody drives my car but me types*? ’Cuz they’re a real pai-”

“Your eyes are quite puffy, O-Ryou. From tears, I presume?”

“.....!! Th-There’s just a ton of dust in the car, GOT IT?!”

Ryou snatches Machi’s sunglasses off the dashboard with a start and slips them on to hide her eyes.

The car pulled out of the lot.

A seemingly endless stream of steep mountain scenery passed by the windows as Machi carefully navigated through all the forks in the road. She took breaks when necessary, only to start up once again.

The two didn’t say another word. The only sound accompanying them on

their journey was whatever came out of the radio that neither bothered to turn off.

Then, in the middle of a long stretch of tunnel, the radio signal cut out.

“O-Ryou,” Machi said, her eyes on the road. “As I have given her my word, I cannot discuss what we spoke of in the interview.”

“.....”

“Though, I doubt she would mind if I expressed what I saw.”

The girl she had spoken with but a few hours ago.

And the girl she had met years ago.

The two overlapped in Machi’s mind as she continued.

“She is as she always has been. The very same girl we played against in the Kansai Shogi Association Fiery, cheeky, talented to a fault and straightforward Still the girl who is infatuated with Shogi and Yaichi alone. Yes, I believe——.”

Sensing something amiss in the passenger seat, Machi stopped herself midsentence.

Then, in a gentle tone, “O-Ryou.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s fine. You may smoke.”

A single orange spot glowed from within the dark car passing through the tunnel.

“Glad to hear it,” came a quiet yet trembling voice that seemed to be on the verge of tears.

——My apologies, O-Ryou.

Machi thought to herself.

There was a strong possibility that Ginko would return to professional Shogi. Machi was certain of it. However, that day was still a long way off One look at how frail Naniwa's Snow White had become was enough to confirm that.

—*Her attack has run dry.*

Ginko had always been on the offensive, but it had been stretched too thin. The *Dragon King* was now left vulnerable.

Endure.

Endure. Endure. Endureendureendureendure. Endure.

In sixth grade, after tasting humiliation at the hands of a girl four years her junior, losing despite her playing two matches at once The name of the boy she had sworn to pursue was taken from her.

Even so, Machi bided her time without attacking. She endured from within an *anaguma* despite the surefire checkmate that had unfolded before her eyes.

Ginko would return ..., which meant she had to settle things before then.

—Charge in for the checkmate with all your might once the opportune moment presents itself. That is the way of the *anaguma* Right, Ginko?

The tunnel exit came into view and Machi sped toward it.

Now it was finally here.

Machi Kugui's turn.



AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

The final installment is upon us. The youngest title holder the real Shogi world has ever known appeared and even took two titles. Blink and his story might overtake mine! (haha) Rest assured that I have done everything in my power to deliver an intense, touching story that can't be found anywhere else!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

As this is the beginning of the end of the series, I wanted the cover to feel particularly special.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 14

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

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RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 14

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